

INNOCENT PURSUITS

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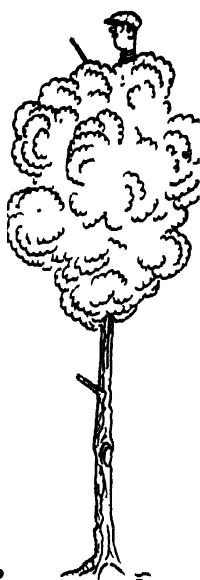


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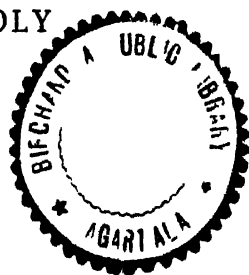
INNOCENT PURSUITS

BY

MAJOR C. S. JARVIS, C.M.G., O.B.E.



Illustrated by ROLY



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CHAPTER I

PECULIAR PETS

One of the things the long years have taught me is never to make a pet of a creature of the wild if one can possibly avoid it, and by creature of the wild I mean foxes, badgers, squirrels, rabbits and other fauna, and all the bird species. The reason for this view is that the small displaced person to whom one has given house-room almost invariably proves to be a most attractive and amusing personality, and when it has completely won one's heart to become almost indispensable it meets a tragic end, which is usually caused by the little creature placing too much confidence in the benignity of the human being and his accessories, amongst which one must include his dog and cat. The one exception to the rule is the hedgehog, since he shows no desire to become an occupant of the house and meet the members of the household on an equal footing, but is very pleased to be accepted as a smallholder or assistant gardener on the estate. Here he will show his gratitude for comfortable quarters by working assiduously something more than a 44-hour week with no hint of "go slow" in his methods.

The foregoing may constitute very sound advice, but it is of that very common type of good counsel which is not of much use to anyone since the average person does not go out of his way to acquire these wild creature pets. They are forced upon him, so to speak, for he finds a starving baby squirrel beneath a drey, takes compassion on a badger cub whose mother has been shot, sets the broken leg of a fox cub and, one way and another, having taken the initial step and committed himself, must put up with the consequences.

My very earliest experiences were with a pair of ravens, who were rescued by my father from a deserted nest and who lived in the garden, and they were exceptions to the general rule as I do not think

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anyone was particularly fond of them. As a constant music-hall turn they were vastly amusing, and it seemed to me that everything they did was in the nature of playing to the gallery with the idea of getting a laugh. The only person who saw nothing funny in them whatsoever was the gardener for, while he was at work setting out plants in the spring, they would watch with their wicked black eyes his every movement from their stance in the yew tree, and immediately he went off to his midday dinner they would descend, pull up everything he had planted and lay them out in orderly rows along the bed. It was necessary also to keep all the bedroom windows closed since otherwise the pair of scoundrels would enter and play havoc with dressing-tables, flying off to some secret hiding-place with anything that could be carried, and which could not have the stopper pulled out of it so that the contents could be poured over the carpet or the bed. The big yew tree, in which these ravens lived, had low hanging branches that reached the lawn and, when they were not busily occupied in worrying human beings, the two birds would put in an hour or so amusing themselves on a swing provided by nature. One raven would perch on a low branch whilst the other would grip the far end of it in his beak, and sway his companion up and down. Then when the first bird had had enough he would descend and take his turn at swinging his companion. I do not recall what happened to these ravens, but have an idea that their end was an unhappy one.

The next pet I remember was a badger cub brought to us by a farmer after the mother had been killed at a badger dig. There was no difficulty about bringing him up as he accepted a baby's bottle without hesitation, and on reaching badgerhood estate he became very much a member of the family, which at that time consisted of four dogs and three human beings. I have put the dogs first since in our family it seems the natural thing to do, and also in some ways the dogs were more concerned with his presence than were we. I think the dogs liked him, but I am not quite sure about it since the badger failed to observe those communal laws which all dogs make among themselves to ensure harmony in the house. For instance, he never grasped, perhaps he never really tried, that each dog, who be-

longs to a respectable community, has his own dinner-plate set in a special corner of the room, and that no dog should approach the plate of another until its owner has signified that he has finished with it. It is then of course permissible—in fact a matter of common courtesy—to give it a further lick over, but the badger held the view that he could give every plate a lick over at any time. Also he refused to recognise that certain dogs had exclusive rights to particular positions on the hearth-rug in front of the fire, and was in the habit of throwing himself down with unnecessary vigour in the warmest corner regardless of whether it was already occupied or not.

In most ways, however, he was an attractive and lovable character and, except for his refusal to accept canine regulations, his only little failing was that he kept the most shocking hours. When let out the last thing at night with the dogs he would frequently decide, if the weather were fine, not to return until it suited him. As he was naturally a nocturnal creature one felt one could not take exception to this, and if he had stayed out the whole night there would have been no complaints. Unfortunately, however, he would choose to return at all hours, usually about 3 a.m., and finding the door closed against him would be furious. Unless it was opened immediately in response to his first peremptory scratch he would proceed to tear the door down. I have a recollection of damaged doors figuring prominently among the items of dilapidations which, as tenant, I had to make good. I really do not know why I did this since none of my tenants ever think of compensating me for any damage that they, or their animals, may do.

We owned poor old Brock for just over a year, and then one morning when he was taking a stroll through a neighbouring field with the dogs the party met a man with a gun. This creature, who belonged to the kill-everything-you-see fraternity, promptly shot him, being under the impression that a badger trotting along among four friendly dogs must be a wild animal.

Brock's unhappy end more or less coincided with the outbreak of the 'war to end wars', and we did not begin to acquire unwanted pets in the house and garden again until we had settled down in the

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Egyptian desert. Here, one might almost say, they rained down on us from heaven, since every incapacitated member of the passing migratory hosts of birds saw our green garden of plenty in the wilderness, and made a bee-line for it. The great majority of these uninvited birds were not exactly in the canary class since the first was a flamingo, whom we boarded out with our turkeys, as no other accommodation was available. The turkeys resented his arrival and never really got to like him, so I passed him on to the Cairo Zoo, who accepted him gladly.

There followed innumerable hawks, owls, harriers and falcons, who insisted on nursing-home and sometimes surgical treatment until they were fit to continue the migratory flight, and who, if they did not recover sufficiently to regain the use of their wings during the first fortnight, usually died.

A stork, sometimes two or three, was a regular feature during the spring return migration, and these birds, who from some slight disability were unable to finish the journey, stayed on in the garden until the summer. Being accustomed to the proximity of human beings in their northern homes they showed no fear and would accept food and water readily, but they were obviously most unhappy. One would see the unfortunate displaced person wandering disconsolately down the sweet-pea rows in the evening with his head between his shoulders in the usual stork fashion, and looking with his long thin legs very much like a tall learned professor, with his hands in his pockets, sunk in the depths of depression. The poor fellows had every reason for this gloomy outlook on life since it was only very rarely that one recovered strength sufficiently to complete the flight to Europe.

Among the many interesting specimens that I was forced to adopt in Egypt was a Scop's owl, an eastern variety that has been recorded in this country only on two or three occasions, and the peculiarity of the Scop's owl is that he is far more owl-like than any other member of the *strigidae* family. He has a long, narrow body quite out of proportion to his head with its cocked ears, and he specialises in queer attitudes for, instead of looking at one in a straightforward

manner, he prefers usually a stance on a branch at its junction with the trunk, and peers round the other side of the tree bole with wide staring eyes. I do not know what the Government snoopers of to-day look like, nor how they operate when they peer round the doors of restaurants in the hopes of seeing a bit of illegal food served, but I should imagine that both in technique and appearance they resemble a Scop's owl.



A Government snooper of to-day.

The Scop's owl we acquired had damaged his wing on the telephone wire, and when he recovered the use of it again he decided to stay on with us, not so much from affection we gathered, since he never at any time showed any sign of it, but rather on account of the regular supply of mice which our Arab orderly caught for him in the chicken-food shed. He lived in a large eucalyptus tree which hung over the lawn, and almost the only amusement we obtained from him was watching the reactions of our guests when they sat under the tree at 'sundowner' time, and gradually became conscious

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that they were being watched by a pair of glaring eyes which, if they were not actually hostile, were not particularly friendly. The growing knowledge that they were under close scrutiny by something caused them to look around uneasily until in the failing light they suddenly detected the outline of this very queer-shaped owl a few feet above their heads, and the result was usually of an electric nature, with a whisky and soda spilt on the grass. This Scop's owl may be numbered among our successes with migrant birds, for he remained with us a whole year living his retired life in the eucalyptus tree, and on the arrival of a flight of his relatives during the next migratory season he departed with them one night without leaving a p.p.c. card, unless the circle of dead grass on the lawn beneath his favourite perch figured as this formality of departure.

The one creature of the wild which I decided quite early in life I would in no circumstances adopt as a pet is the fox, as, however attractive he may be in his youth, his nature is essentially blood-thirsty and ruthless, and these failings can never be eradicated. Whenever I make good resolutions of this type Fate, or whoever it is that controls my destiny, sees to it that I am circumvented, and so of course I was saddled with a fox. I blame the London Zoo for this as they wrote to me that they were anxious to obtain a specimen of the Arabian leopard, and when I offered a £5 reward to the local Beduin for a cub they presented me with the young of almost every variety of Sinaitic fauna except a leopard. One of the pups they produced was so very new born that it was impossible to identify it as a fox or anything else and, as the Beduin who brought it told a thrilling story of a life and death struggle with its mother, a fierce leopardess, I decided to keep it provided it would accept a baby's bottle. I was quite certain it was not a leopard, but I thought it might be a wolf, hyæna, or possibly a lynx, and therefore an animal that the London Zoo would appreciate.

The small animal took to the feeding-bottle readily, and in three short weeks proved that I had been 'had' again, for it developed into the most obvious and ordinary fox cub. When the two dogs in the family at that time, a Scottie and a most select and snobbish

Saluki, discovered that this low-bred wild creature was to become a member of the household they were greatly incensed, and left no stone unturned to show us what they thought of it. Seeing that they were both the most perfect gentlemen—and a characteristic of a gentleman is that he is never openly rude to anyone in his own house—there could be no question of taking active steps to rid themselves of the unwanted guest, but their behaviour made us feel most uncomfortable, for they would refuse to come into a room if the fox was there. The Scottie from the doorway would look longingly at his cushion by the fire and then, noticing the presence of the small fox, would stalk away in a dignified fashion to throw himself down with a crash and a sigh of despair in the draughty hall. In the same way, if the cub approached the Saluki as he lay stretched in his private chair, this old aristocrat of the nomad tribes would jump down at once and stalk out of the room with every hair of his feathered tail registering annoyance and contempt.

We were just beginning to realise that the passive resistance on the part of the dogs had reached the stage when something would have to be done to save the happy home from being broken up when the cub blotted his copybook badly. Up to the age of four months he had been a charming and affectionate little creature, and then one of our ducklings fell ill and was brought into the house in a basket to be placed in front of the kitchen fire. Ten minutes later the house rang with shrill vulpine shrieks, and the young fox, pursued by the whole Berberine staff, came rushing out of the kitchen with the torn body of the duckling in its mouth. With forebodings as to the fate of our poultry run in the future we passed the culprit on to a friend in Cairo who particularly wanted a fox as a pet; and I believe he lived to regret it.

Perhaps the most amusing and attractive of all our uninvited guests was Maurice, the ordinary wild rabbit, whom we acquired whilst living in Dorset. He came to us in a most unusual fashion, for in those days we had an Irish terrier bitch who regularly twice a year came into full milk, an uncalled-for state of affairs that perplexed her. One day when she was suffering from one of these spells

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of undeserved lactation we found her coiled up in her basket apparently suckling a pup, and discovered she had brought in from the fields a tiny rabbit, which presumably she had dug out from a breeding 'stab'. The small blind creature was doing his best, but the situation was much too large for him, and so we passed him on to the cat who at that time had kittens, and who after a slight protest adopted the small stranger.

Maurice, who quickly grew into a fine bouncing buck rabbit, had the free run of the house and made himself very much at home, parading with the dogs at meal times and begging for scraps from the table. His greatest joy, however, was the staircase, which he thought a wonderful construction, and at the slightest excuse—affected alarm or an attack of *joie de vivre*—he would shoot up to the first floor, jumping four steps at a leap, and then come bounding down again to dash through the open door to the lawn beyond. One day an old friend of ours, who systematically did himself very well with the port at dinner and a whole variety of other beverages before and after the meal, came to call at about seven on a summer's evening. I met him in the open doorway, and he was looking quite pale—for him.

'I am afraid there must be something radically wrong with my eyes,' he said, 'but as I came up the drive I distinctly saw a wild rabbit on the lawn, and, instead of bolting into the shrubbery, it looked to me as if he ran through the open door and went up the stairs!'

It was this playful habit of doing everything 'at the double' like a Grenadier Guardsman which proved poor Maurice's undoing. If he suddenly decided he would go from one of the upstairs bedrooms to the shrubbery the far side of the lawn, it was impossible for him to proceed in a leisurely fashion—he had to do it with the minimum of bounds. The family, complete with four dogs and cat, would be seated peacefully under the trees in the gloaming when suddenly a brown streak would shoot past us, as Maurice, taking off from the front steps, would land in the centre of the party and then shoot into the bushes with a generous display of white scut. Immediately, the four dozing dogs would spring to their feet instinctively to give



*The parlour-maid
who witnessed the
killing.*

chase, and then, realising their mistake, would return to their seats, muttering angrily: 'It's That Maurice Again!'

One day whilst we were absent from the house it happened, and when we returned in the evening we found the mangled body of poor little Maurice lying on the lawn. The four dogs were all most thoroughly ashamed of themselves, and in canine fashion all confessed to the murder, but we never really discovered who was the leading criminal. The parlour-maid, whom we knew to be the

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biggest liar in Dorset, and who had witnessed the killing, stated that the two ringleaders in the horrible murder were the two foster-mothers—Biddy, the Irish terrier, and the cat!

For the sake of my faith in feminine nature I have always persuaded myself that this account was merely the product of a highly-coloured imagination. Although the relationship between this cat and the dogs was cordial and even affectionate, I do not think it was to the point of organised clan warfare!

The question of dog *vis-à-vis* cat is a puzzling one, and on the surface there is justification for the ancient saying about leading a cat-and-dog life, which indicates a general state of hostility, with constant quarrels, since the average dog will always chase a cat whenever he sees one, with a display of what might be taken for savagery. Actually, this is usually play-acting, since a cat-killing dog, or one with cat-murdering ideas, is very much the exception. The fact remains, however, that the dog tries to live up to the traditional belief concerning the intense dislike his race has for the cat, while the cat, for her part, reciprocates with a show of feline animosity which takes the form of a greatly swollen tail and a ferocious expression on her face, accompanied by venomous spitting.

The peculiar thing about this age-old racial hostility is that when a dog and a cat live together in a house, particularly when they met first as puppy and kitten, the affection they have one for the other borders on devotion, and is usually very much warmer than it is between two dogs or two cats in similar circumstances. In this friendly companionship it is usually the cat that acts as the senior and controls the situation, especially when they are lying together on the hearth-rug in front of the fire. One form this discipline often takes is that the dog has to submit to what we now call a 'hair-do' and general tidying up, whether he likes it or not, and if he displays any restlessness during this treatment he receives a slap on the nose to instruct him to keep quiet.

Along with the many dogs we have owned, we have had, from time to time, a cat also on the ration strength, and they have always shown this affectionate regard one for the other. Our present

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Scottie affords proof to show not only the warmth of the affection that a dog can have for his cat companion, but also that a dog's memory is considerably longer than we sometimes imagine. From his puppyhood he was brought up with a small black cat, to whom he was deeply attached, until the unfortunate cat, while hunting by night, was caught in a rabbit trap, and had ultimately to be put down. The Scottie was obviously broken-hearted for some considerable time over the disappearance of his companion, and even now, after the lapse of four years, he cries bitterly if, from his seat in the car, he sees a small black cat by the wayside which he thinks may possibly be his old friend.

CHAPTER. 2

DECEPTIONS, INNOCENT AND OTHERWISE

Although I have dedicated this chapter to deception, this does not mean that I subscribe to the popular belief that all sportsmen are born liars and conceited ones at that. I do however agree that there is an almost inevitable tendency for memory to elaborate, so that in all innocence the 4 lb. trout one caught under the big willow several years ago tips the scale at 5 lbs. in narrative to-day. Fishermen in particular suffer from a bad reputation, yet it has been my experience to meet those who tend rather to overdo modesty, who exaggerate their mistakes and who emphasise when they do catch a really good fish that it was due entirely to good luck, because the salmon or trout was landed despite gross bad handling of which the merest tyro would have been ashamed.

It was only on one occasion that I met what has been regarded from time immemorial as the typical boastful angler, when at a fishing hotel my boat companion and I spent a long and wearisome evening with a man who always knew the right fly instinctively, who had never made a mistake in his life, and who spent all his spare time going round and hooking with his first cast fish that had been ignoring others for a week or more. He gave us a vast amount of advice about the tactics we should employ the following day on the lake, confidently predicting that, whatever others might do, he himself would undoubtedly return with the limit allowed. My partner and I came in the following evening with five nice trout, but we were anxious to meet our friend of the previous night since we wished to see what a really first-class angler could do on the water on a not particularly good day. We were disappointed to learn that he was playing darts in the public bar since, having returned with

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an empty basket, he did not wish to renew his acquaintanceship of the previous evening.

It was at Blagdon Lake in Somerset that I met this angler who was far from modest, and by coincidence it was there also that I discovered that quite unconsciously I myself was addicted to elaboration. My first visits to this famous lake were way back in the dim past before the first world war and not very long after the remarkable baskets of trout in superb condition, which were caught by lucky anglers during the first two seasons, became head-line news in all the sporting journals of those days. I had fished at Blagdon on three or four occasions before 1914, and have always been under the impression that I and my partners in the boat had caught several fine trout, all of which were over 3 lbs.

It came as something of a shock when, on re-visiting the lake some thirty years later, I took the trouble during the tea hour in the fishing hut to look up the records which have been most carefully kept and found that only one of the fish brought in by my boat weighed over 3 lbs. It was all there in black and white, and certified as correct by the very famous Donald Carr, Blagdon's first fishing keeper, and I can offer no explanation as to why for all these years I have believed implicitly and have told others that my catches at Blagdon were very much better than they actually were. It all goes to prove what a very unreliable factor is one's memory, and indicates that every man should keep a game book in which he writes every evening after the day's sport that which he has to record as the products of his rod or gun.

Incidentally the one trout to my record which did weigh 3 lbs. was not caught by myself, but by my father who was in the boat with me, but was not present as a fisherman. It was in 1915, and I was taking advantage of two days' embarkation leave before sailing for the Dardanelles by fishing Blagdon, and my father had come down to Somerset to say farewell to me there. He had never been particularly keen on fishing and had not had a rod in his hand for at least thirty years, but in accordance with the established custom at Blagdon he was into the biggest fish of the day with the first cast

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he made with my rod when very reluctantly he took it from me while I lit my pipe. I do remember that episode very clearly.

At this point my conscience urges me on to make confession of one deception that took place early in my career as a fisherman, and which was undeniably deliberate.

It happened when I was a subaltern in those peaceful years before the 1914-18 war, and in those days young men who fished regularly for salmon or trout were exceedingly rare since angling was regarded solely as a pursuit for the middle-aged and elderly, who were not active enough for any other forms of sports. This was the more or less general attitude towards fishing, but there was also a quite considerable section of the population who looked upon it as a pastime for the mentally deficient.

In my own battalion, which hails from a chalk-stream county, there were the usual sixteen-odd subalterns, and of these there was only one beside myself who owned a rod and fished whenever the opportunity offered. This was representative of the state of affairs in every regiment with which I came in contact in those days, and since the Army offered better opportunities for fishing than any other calling owing to the location of its many barracks in the United Kingdom, which then included Ireland, it may be assumed that the percentage of fishermen in other professions and callings was even less. To-day it is difficult to make comparisons since, so far as I can make out, battalions no longer exist as complete units and have been replaced by the group system, but I think that almost every officer will fish when he gets the opportunity.

Possibly the main reason for the increased popularity of fishing to-day is not so much due to a change of opinion about its being an elderly man's pastime, but rather because the motor-car has made practically all the waters in the land easily accessible so that one arrives at the river's bank or the lough side in a fresh and energetic condition and when dead-beat at the close of a hard day's work one can settle down in a comfortable seat in the car to cover the odd ten or twenty miles to one's home, or the fishing hotel, at one's leisure. It was a very different state of affairs in the past, when a day's fishing

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usually meant an hour or more on a 'push bike' over mountain roads which were wearisome enough in the morning, but which were an almost intolerable burden at the end of a long and tiring day, particularly as on most occasions one was returning with quite a substantial weight of trout in the fishing bag. However attractive a big catch of trout may be when one is actually taking them, one is apt to wish that it had been considerably smaller when one has some ten miles of strenuous pedalling or pushing up steep gradients in the dusk. Unfortunately the comparative comfort with which fishermen to-day can pursue the sport has led not only to an enormous increase in the percentage of the population that has adopted angling as a pastime, but to a corresponding deterioration in fishing waters, which are now proving insufficient and are largely over-fished.

Conditions were certainly much more satisfactory at the time of my story, when my battalion was stationed at Kilworth Camp in Co. Cork, and a feature of Kilworth Camp was, and possibly is still, the River Funcheon, which flows round the mountain on which the camp was built. On the southern and easily accessible side the fishing was what the Irish call 'sulky', a very suitable description of a water in which there are plenty of heavy trout who are seldom in a mood to take anything the angler offers them, but on the north side a very different state of affairs pertained. The river here, being nearer its source, was smaller and more rapid in its flow, and the trout in it, so far from being 'sulky', were always in the best of tempers and willing to take anything, which was probably due to the fact that no one ever troubled to fish such an inaccessible water that was far away from any town or railway station.

The main drawback to Kilworth was that one went there not to fish, but to carry out field firing and battalion and brigade training, which in those days meant work every day from 7 a.m. until 5 p.m. with a full church parade on Sundays at which the attendance of all subalterns was compulsory; and in our particular battalion we suffered from a middle-aged adjutant with a marked anti-subaltern complex. He regarded them as 'waris'—intolerable excrescences on

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the long-suffering face of nature, and it was hopeless to suggest to him that one should have a day off for fishing since in his eyes a subaltern should work all the hours of daylight.

One day, however, when he was away from the camp, I took advantage of his absence to write my name in the leave book for a day's leave on the morrow, and was delighted to find later that the casual officer answering for him had scrawled the word 'granted' against it. The following morning I breakfasted very early, and with my rod and tackle was pushing my bicycle stealthily through the rows of tents to the open road and freedom beyond when an orderly who did not recognise me came along with a note addressed to 'Lieutenant Jarvis' in the adjutant's handwriting.

'Are you Lieutenant Jarvis, sir?' he asked as he saluted and handed it to me.

Before admitting my identity I unfolded the slip of paper and read 'Please note that your leave is cancelled and that you are for butt duty to-day at 8.30 a.m.' With an admirable presence of mind worthy of a better cause I gave the note back to the orderly, and pointing to my tent said: 'This is for Lieutenant Jarvis, and that is his tent right at the end of the line.' Some ten seconds later, while the orderly still rapped on the canvas of an empty tent, I was well beyond the boundary of the camp, and with a steep gradient and strong south-west wind in my favour was on my way.

I salved my conscience for my deceitful behaviour—and I have always found my conscience willing to listen to reason—by assuring it that I had not told a deliberate lie, but on the other hand had stuck most meticulously to the truth. The note *was* addressed to Lieutenant Jarvis, and the tent to which I directed the orderly *was* the tent of that officer, so that if he failed to find the subaltern detailed for butt duty it was not my fault. I had done my best in the circumstances. In any case the gods who direct the operations of fishermen, and who arrange their catches for them, must have taken a very lenient view of my behaviour since it proved to be a wonderful day with everything in my favour.

When I arrived at the little bridge which spans the river in the

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valley, I found the water rapidly clearing after a slight flood, and while I was putting up my rod the rise started with a series of loud plops as the first of a big hatch of olives began to come down on the stream. Here, there and everywhere feeding trout broke the surface and with fish in this mood, which lasted without any cessation until dusk, the landing-net was in constant use so that at the close of a very perfect day I tied my rod to the bicycle, and began the wearv grind up the steep gradient with no fewer than forty-two half-pounders.

I still remember the almost intolerable burden of that 20 lbs. of fish dragging on the strap across my shoulder during my struggle up the mountain-side, and also I have not forgotten the very nasty look the adjutant gave me the following morning as he stalked into the mess for breakfast. Judging from the malignity of his expression he had a very shrewd idea of what had happened in the officers' lines when I had deceived his orderly, but after eating two of my very excellent trout he began to look on the bright side.

'Extraordinary good fish some worthless fellows catch when they are absent without leave,' he muttered as he pushed his plate away, 'but if they try it a second time they will find out what's coming to them!'

I would not like to suggest that subalterns as a race are more lacking in moral rectitude than other people, but my own lapse at this stage of my life remind me of an even more blatant occurrence, when some years ago there came wandering into my desert province, from a regiment stationed in Cairo a very young subaltern armed with sporting rifle and shot gun, and I am afraid he was disappointed, for he found the game both scanty and unapproachable. He climbed over two vast mountain ranges, but failed to get his ibex; and he walked up the valleys with only a few small Hey's partridges to show for his labours. In the tent of a Beduin Arab, however, he found a skin of the rare Arabian variety of leopard which was remarkable both for its size and colour, and in all probability did not hail from Sinai at all, but from much farther to the east. This he bought for £1, and I rendered some small assistance as interpreter

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while the deal was in progress in reducing the price originally asked.

The aftermath of this small business transaction was disconcerting, for I was immediately inundated with letters from various officers stationed in Egypt who wished to come up at once to obtain a leopard similar to the one 'shot' by the subaltern, and desired the fullest information as to locality and other details. I do not know what a really correctly-minded man should do in a case such as this. Probably, in the interests of integrity, I should have come forward with the truth, but when I thought of the grim discomfiture of the young liar, and realised that the story would live with him for the rest of his service, if it did not bring that service to an end, I did nothing, but wrote evasive answers. And so both the subaltern and the peninsula of Sinai are credited with an almost record leopard to which neither is entitled.

It occurs to me as I write that my own deviations from strict veracity have always been dictated by expediency, rather than a desire, such as this young subaltern's, to boast. Indeed the next occasion on which I was accused of deceitful behaviour was merely caused by a slight omission on my part to pass on information.

It took place during my first introduction to Palestine in Murray's Army, which later became Allenby's. We had passed over the Sinai frontier, and having fought two inconclusive battles at Gaza, remained encamped in front of this old Palestine town for some five extremely boring months in the midst of a bleak stretch of extremely boring desert. After we had been there for some time without finding anything in the form of recreation, we began to understand why Samson had tied firebrands to the brushes of three hundred foxes, and let them loose in the cornfields and vineyards. We presumed he had done it to see if he could flush some game from a quite gameless land.

Towards the end of our stay, however, an early morning patrol came in with some most valuable information. It was nothing to do with the enemy; since, except for an odd sniper's long-range bullet from the north, they had not seen anything of them, but an hour



The subaltern who "shot" the record leopard.

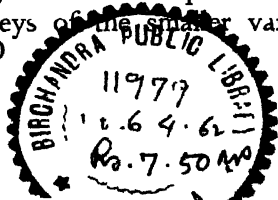
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after dawn they had noticed flight after flight of sand grouse winging their way across the clear morning sky in a south-easterly direction. This suggested the presence of surface water somewhere in the vicinity, and the following morning a special officer's patrol, detailed for the purpose, located it in the form of a series of shallow pools in the bed of one of the tributary *Wadis* (dry water-courses) that flow into the main Wadi Ghuzzee. Here every morning approximately an hour after dawn the sand grouse, of which there were two varieties, the small coroneted and the bigger black-breasted Imperial, would come in from the surrounding desert in packs of from thirty to forty, drink their ration of water, which they did in an incredibly short period, and wing their way back again.

The flight lasted for an hour to an hour and a half and provided the most excellent shooting for two or three guns, but the very greatest secrecy had always to be observed and every precaution taken from the time the party of guns started from its camp until it returned. This was not because of the risk of a raid from the Turkish enemy, which was, of course, a possibility, but from the fear that our very select little grouse shoot should become known to the many other units in the vicinity, in which case it would, of course, have become as sterile as regards game as the remainder of that very sterile land. I remember in this connection, when talking of other days recently to an old friend, who had been in the same campaign but in a different unit, mentioning this excellent little sand grouse shoot and the sport it had provided in the dog days of 1917.

'You had good grouse shooting when we were lying in front of Gaza?' he said accusingly. 'And you and I used to meet almost every day during that long, dreary period and say how bored we were, but you never said a word about it then? What deceit, and what a friend!'

Subsequently, and just about the time that we had worn the sand grouse flight rather thin, we continued the advance northwards, and I was unable to pay any further attention to game shooting until peace was proclaimed. It was then found that the rocky hills around Hebron and between Natrun and Jerusalem held quite a number of chikor partridges, with odd coveys of the smaller variety, the



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Himalaya or Hey's, and that after Christmas woodcock were sometimes almost plentiful in some areas where the crests of the hills were covered with high scrub bushes. I had some of the most exhausting days of my life on the very rough going over these hills since in the party of guns was always a Palestine police officer, who was 6 ft. 7 ins., and who seemed to stride from one hill-top to the next.

On the Sinai-Israeli frontier there is a small but quite important little village with a police control post, a petrol filling station, various shops, and all the other facets of civilisation, but Auja, as it is called, was not ever thus, and in the early days of the mandate the Palestine Government did not know of its existence, or could not be worried with it. Auja apparently has had its ups and downs since on the higher ground to the west there are the ruins of an early Christian church dating back to A.D. 300, and in the days prior to the 1914-18 war the Turks had built barracks, shops and a police station there.

In 1922, when I rediscovered Auja, however, it was like Goldsmith's 'Sweet Auburn', completely deserted and, though I doubt if the description, 'loveliest village of the plain', could be applied to it, it was very well worth visiting since the three streets and the houses were alive with chikor partridges. I imagine they had been in peaceful occupation of the village for four years or more since, when I appeared on the scene, I saw a covey of sixteen birds strolling down the high street in a leisurely fashion to disappear through the portals of the police station, while a second covey flew through the glassless windows of the general store. Luckily I was on an important patrol at the time, with the result that I was accompanied by another British officer, and we both carried on our camels that most necessary adjunct to successful administration in the desert, the shot gun.

Neither of us had ever taken part in urban partridge shooting before—I doubt if there are many men who can claim to be expert at it and who can advise how drives should be carried out—but we did not do too badly considering our inexperience. Firing

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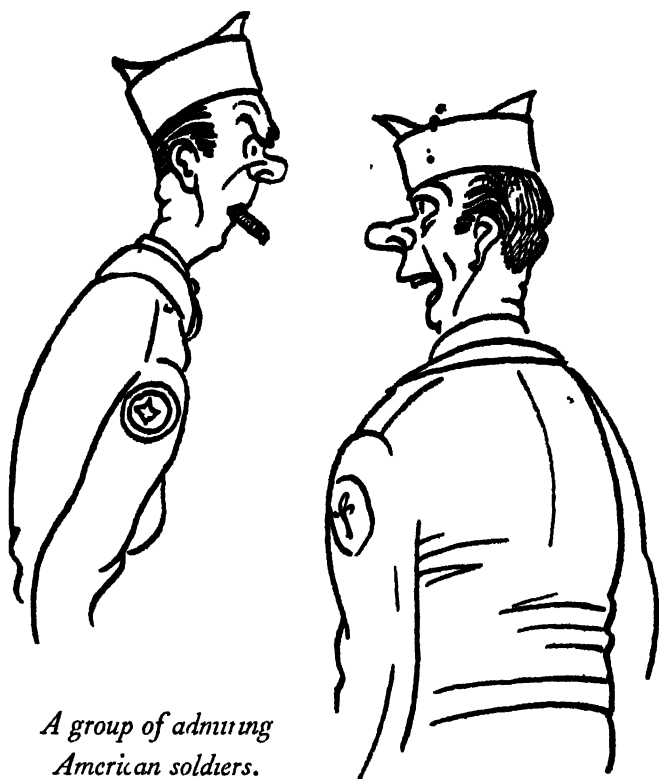
two barrels into a police station may have been a quite common occurrence in Palestine during its recent troubles, but I imagine I must have been the first to start the reprehensible practice when I flushed the covey in what had been the superintendent's office and got a right and left as they went out over the wall of the yard. My companion in the next street dropped a single bird as they passed him on their way to the barracks, but we failed with those that had taken refuge in the general store since they went up through the rafters of the ceiling to the window gaps above. The old market place held a covey of fast-running Hey's partridge, but it was at the dis-used railway station that we really got on terms with them, and two coveys flushed from the stationmaster's office in the ruined buildings, and war-time dumps beyond, were well thinned out before they realised that the deserted village was not the safe feeding ground it had been in the halcyon days of peace.

Again silence cloaked our discovery, and henceforward I managed to find reasons for inspecting Auja on every possible occasion, and, though the birds were never as numerous and so confiding as on my first visit, there were seldom less than three coveys to be found somewhere among the ruined buildings. I imagine that as they had lived for some generations, partridge generations and not human, in streets and houses, they were adverse to leaving their haunts for the rocky hills where they would have had a better chance of avoiding a man with a gun. Auja was always good for a couple of brace or more, until the sad day when the Palestine Government rebuilt and manned the police station, and made it the important frontier post that it is to-day, but as the result, I doubt if there is a partridge within ten miles of the place at the present time.

In fairness to the human species I feel I should add that exhibitionism and deception are by no means confined to the two-legged variety of sportsmen alone. A most interesting scene was enacted by a member of the canine breed outside my house one evening during the last year of the recent war. In the morning I had discovered in the lane the body of a nearly full-grown fox cub, which I imagine had been killed overnight by a passing motor car. My

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Scottie and I examined the corpse—the Scottie rather uninterestedly, as is usual with dogs in the case of an animal they have not killed themselves—and I left the body lying by the road in the hopes that someone would remove it, and save me the trouble of burying it. .



*A group of admiring
American soldiers.*

That evening I was calling the Scottie to come in to bed, and at that moment some half-dozen American soldiers came up the lane.

'Say, Bo!' one of them shouted, 'your little dog's too busy to come right now—he's just killing a fox as big as himself.'

I looked over the gate, and there was the deceitful Scottie, surrounded by a group of admiring Americans, giving the last savage shake to the long-defunct body of the cub.

I entirely failed to see that the truth was maintained, and left the

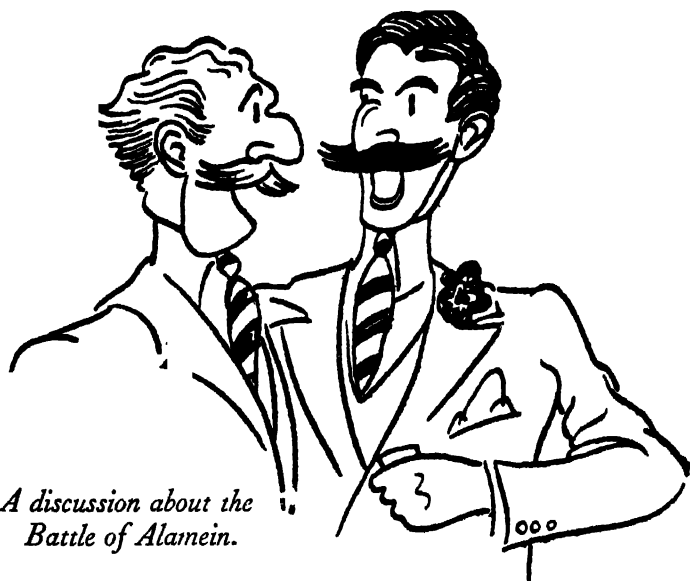
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little dog proudly basking in his false glory, so that no doubt some of our American friends have returned to their own country with the story that in England they have a breed of small terriers which will catch and kill a fox single-handed.

CHAPTER 3

SPORT AND HISTORY IN EGYPT

Regularly every autumn, when the 8th Army's annual dinner is held in London to celebrate the turning-point of the late war at Alamein in the Libyan Desert, a discussion starts as to the derivation of the battlefield's name, and the historical events that happened



there in the dim past. The impression that one obtains is that Alamein was a very well-known place long before the 8th Army rallied there to withstand the invasion of Egypt, but in the days when I knew it, immediately after the 1914-18 war, it was only a mark on the map with a derelict railway station.

It had no history at all, and was easily the most unattractive spot in a very unattractive harsh desert. The only reason why it had come into existence, and had been honoured by a name and a railway station, was that it happened to be the starting-place for the little-

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known oasis of Maghra, which lies in the deep depression of that name some thirty-five miles to the south. The word 'depression', which has a sinister sound, seems rather out of place in this particular connection, since it was this vast low-lying and impassable swamp on the left flank of our army when it rallied after its retreat, which prevented the Germans from making a turning movement and which saved Egypt.

As an administrative officer, in 1919 my district extended from the suburbs of Alexandria to the small Arab village of Dabaa, a hundred miles away to the west. From a shooting and general sporting point of view it had not very much to offer except some very few-and-far-between Barbary partridges, and some quite good duck shooting on Lake Mariut near Alexandria. But very shortly after the end of the war in 1918 this was utterly spoilt owing to the hordes of shooters of all nationalities who swarmed on to the lake on every day of the week. I was still engaged in the task of seeing as much as was possible of my very large district, which extended over a hundred miles into the desert to the south, and most of my travelling over bad going was done by means of the riding camel, which is an efficient, but not particularly rapid method of getting across country.

I was informed by the Beduin Arab, Obeid, who always accompanied me when I went out with the gun, that the very best place for *batt* (duck) in the whole of Libya was the lake in the Maghra Oasis, because here the birds came in every winter in thousands, and no one ever shot them for the simple reason that no human beings with guns came near the place.

I therefore decided that Maghra Oasis must be inspected at the earliest possible moment, and on a particularly cheerless morning in December I set out from Alamein with a small patrol of Camel Corps along the very rough desert route that winds through the low hills to the south. This camel track is marked in various places by small stone cairns on high points, which one can see at a great distance in that rather featureless desert. The Arabic name for a cairn used as a direction mark is *alam*, and Alamein, which means

two direction marks, is so called because there are two of these cairns fairly close together near the railway station, which show the start of the track to the oasis.

The popular idea of a desert is that it is always a blazing hot waste of sand, and this is correct for about eight months of the year. When, however, in mid-winter there is something in the nature of a gale from the south-east with a driving rain, it can be extremely cold and cheerless, and I have a very vivid recollection of my trek from Alamein to Maghra because it was one of the most chilly and uncomfortable experiences of my life. Every hour I had to dismount from my camel and walk for a mile or more to get my blood into circulation again, and walking when one is on a camel column is not particularly easy, since the camel's shuffling trot is at the rate of five miles an hour, which is a good bit more than the average man can manage at a walk. My gun was slung on the back of my saddle, and on the two occasions when I met with game, a covey of Barbary partridges feeding in a wadi and a pack of Senegal sand grouse on the track, my camel led by an orderly was out of sight in the distance.

Towards evening when we were drawing near the broken ground where the high desert begins to fall away to the valley known as the Maghra Depression, I called a short halt for the purpose of making a pot of tea, and while we were attending to this I sent the baggage camels on ahead, telling the *shawish* in charge to pitch camp in a comfortable spot, if anything of this nature existed, in the neighbourhood of the lake for which I was making.

It was while I was looking for a scrub bush that offered some slight shelter from the chilly wet blast that I flushed a pair of animals, which I imagine are now quite extinct in the Libyan Desert. Even in those days they were so rare and had been seen by so few Europeans that some doubt existed as to their identity. This was a couple of cheetah, and since they shot out of a big tamarisk bush beneath which I was going to sit, I obtained a very clear view of them as they went away in those great easy bounds for which the cheetah is famous.

Their presence pointed to the probability of seeing some gazelle

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in the vicinity, and shortly after we had started to trek again after swallowing a scalding mug of tea, I noticed a small herd in the distance which were almost white, rather than the usual golden-brown colour of the common Dorcas variety. These I identified as the Loder gazelle that is comparatively scarce in this desert, but even if I had been short of meat I did not try a shot at them, since I was so perished by the intense cold that with numbed fingers I would have been unable to hit anything.

It was shortly after this that with the approach of dusk we descended suddenly into a small wadi, and I saw in front of me the most attractive sight of that very cheerless, unpleasant day. In the lee of and beneath a small over-hanging cliff my tent was pitched, and close to the open door was a blazing fire of tamarisk branches, some five feet high. I could almost feel the warmth of the snug nook at a distance of a quarter of a mile.

The following morning, after a most comfortable night, I rose early to attend to the duck, several flights of which I could see on the wing over the marshy lake which lay below the camp. It was satisfactory to see them since Arab *shukaris*, in an endeavour to please and say the right thing, are so frequently too optimistic, and I had learned from experience that when Obeid said the duck were *ziada anni lezoom*—‘more than was necessary’—that it might mean a couple of teal and a coot. Judging from the numbers I could see on the wing, it was evidently going to prove one of those occasions when Obeid had not misled me by Oriental exaggeration.

It was when I arrived on the actual bank of the lake that I began to have misgivings, since I discovered that a dense wall of very high reeds and rushes completely surrounded and hid from view the open stretch of water that I presumed lay beyond. Further investigation proved that the belt of reeds, which was some seventy yards wide, was growing in water six feet deep, so that there was no question of wading through them to get within shot of the many duck which I could hear, but could not see. Also a long and wearisome walk proved that there was not a single break in the towering green wall which hid them from view.

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The only thing to do in the circumstances was to take up a position under cover, and then by throwing stones and shouting, to get the duck on the wing. All that happened, however, after Obeid had yelled himself hoarse, was that a flight or two rose from the lake to circle round lazily well out of shot before they swooped down on the water again. Finally, I told one of the Camel Corps Sudanese to fire a couple of shots from his rifle through the belt of reeds, and this had the required effect, since there was a roar of wings as a dense mass of duck of all varieties rose to a considerable height. Then to my intense disappointment, instead of circling round and round with odd flights swooping downwards as I expected, the whole mass flew off in serried flights to the east.

A pack or two of teal before their discourteous departure did offer me a few chances, and later in the day, after walking many miles, I managed to flush a few small flights of pintail and widgeon from some of the surrounding marshes.

I learnt later from the discomforted Obeid that in ordinary years the local Beduin cut camel-loads of the reeds, which they sold as thatching material in the Nile Valley. This cutting provided a number of open gaps through which one could obtain a view and a shot at the assembled duck on the water, but apparently the recent war had put a stop to this trade. The fact remains that Maghra Oasis stands out unique in my memory as the spot where I saw more duck massed together than I had ever seen previously, and, despite this, provided one of the poorest day's shooting I have experienced. No wonder the 8th Army got sick and tired of the Alamein line and fought their way out of it shortly after the duck-shooting season had started!

On the other hand, some of the best shooting I have had anywhere was in Egypt, for snipe on the Damietta marshes. In fact if the migrant birds are in, and conditions are suitable, it is probably one of the best places in the world for this form of sport, but everything depends on weather and water conditions. I was brought up to believe that water is an element which always seeks the lowest levels and, unlike solids, cannot lie in a slanting position. but this

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theory does not apply to Egyptian marshes where a strong easterly wind will bank up the element to a depth of a foot or more on the western shores, leaving those on the eastern side practically dry. The result of this is that with a change of wind the area of marsh which yesterday was in perfect condition for feeding snipe, with just the right amount of water on the surface of the mud, is to-day out of sight beneath the lake so that, instead of clouds of snipe rising with every step one takes, one sees only the odd bird or two which are met with on the infrequent islands.

I remember spending one Christmas there with a party of friends. We arrived just before dusk on Christmas Eve and strolled out for half an hour, finding conditions perfect and the birds plentiful, but the following morning, when we set forth, a strong easterly wind had altered everything to such an extent that we had to embark in the Coastguard's launch in search of a more suitable ground. This necessitated the employment of a guide, and, immediately this was explained to the *shawish* (sergeant) in charge, we ran alongside the nearest fishing boat and one of the occupants was plucked out of the boat, the attitude by those in authority being that he should have known that he was required as a guide, and should therefore have been present in the launch when we left the quay: and, in any case, he was probably breaking one of the fishery laws. The newly-appointed guide thought all this eminently reasonable, and at once took over his new duties with enthusiasm, leading us without hesitation to a stretch of marsh which was in perfect condition so far as the water was concerned. After this, in some mysterious and purely Nilotic fashion, our guide, having as an expert on *bakerseeny* (snipe) matters established himself on an equal footing with the *ingleezi* sportsmen in the launch, then became senior in authority to the *shawish* (sergeant) in command, ordering him about in no uncertain fashion and taking complete charge of the operations for the rest of the day. It is little episodes such as these when those very sterling specimens of humanity, the Egyptian *fellah* or *sayed samak* (cultivator or fisherman), played their efficient parts that cause me in the very democratic class-conscious England of to-day to look

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back with longing to the times when I drank of the waters of the Nile.

The sport that day was good, but by no means remarkable for, though the snipe were present in some numbers, we did not in our wanderings come across any areas which offer special attraction to this bird. The snipe of Egypt and the snipe of the British Isles have much the same ideas about feeding, and a perfectly clean stretch of bog or marsh does not attract it to any extent. Always it finds the worm-like insects it desires in some place where there is seepage from farm buildings and the manure heaps, the overflow from a cesspit, or, in the case of Egypt, a small area where a herd of *gamoos* (buffalo) have been grazing for some time. Such chosen spots we did not happen upon, and when our guide gave peremptory orders to the now thoroughly-cowed *shawish* to return we had in our bags some thirty or forty snipe each, but not the five score which is the dream of the snipe shooter.

Returning to the mansion-like rest-house where we were staying at dusk, with visions of a real Christmas dinner unsurpassed in the history of Egypt, we found what can best be described as a 'domestic atmosphere'. I may explain that the party consisted of three from the purlieus of Cairo and myself from the wilds of Sinai, and, as it was to be a very special Christmas, the Cairene members of the party had 'explored every avenue' in the well-stocked grocers' shops of the capital, combed out the cold storage depots and overhauled the stock of the wine merchants, and I had brought the largest and fattest turkey from my Sinaitic poultry-farm together with the essential brussels sprouts. We had, however, made one grave mistake, and those residents who have spent many years in the country will marvel how it came to be that a gathering of old-timers should have been guilty of such idiocy. We had all brought our cooks! They were one and all marvellous cooks without equal in that land of good cooks, and I suppose we had all felt that the Christmas dinner would not be a complete success unless our own particular paragons of the culinary art were functioning in the kitchen. I had brought mine because I knew there was no man in Egypt who could roast a

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turkey so well, but, as there were three other cooks with the same reputation grouped round the stove, the atmosphere was suggestive of a sitting of U.N. discussing peace among nations—and one cannot think of anything more intensely hostile than that!

It appeared that my cook, normally a most peaceable man, had adopted a Molotov attitude and had flatly refused to hand over his turkey to be spoiled by others. The situation was extremely tense, but luckily one of the Gqirenes had brought his wife with him, and in her capable and tactful hands the *impasse* was smoothed over. Three cooks were sent off at once in a car to see the highlights of Damietta, and the survivor at once settled down to cook the dinner without further *kalaam* (verbal argument).

The following day we went round by car to the south of the lake, dropping the guns at various points on the way, the general idea being that if one man should strike an area packed with snipe the resulting fusillade would be heard by the others, who would then 'come to the sound of the guns'. After I had been walking for about an hour—and in the very stodgy marshes of Menzala one's rate of progress is not very much more rapid than that of a tortoise—I came to a spot where a *gamoos* herd had been at work for several weeks, with the result that some thirty snipe rose in a cloud with angry squawks. They did so at a moment when my right leg was embedded in liquid mud to the knee, whilst my left foot was firmly placed on a small conical mound surmounted by a scrub bush. This stance is not one from which one brings off unerring rights and lefts, but it happened to be the position which I was forced to adopt during the greater part of that morning. The marsh in this spot was covered with small scrub bushes, the roots of which held the soil together in the immediate vicinity, but in between the bushes the great splay hooves of the buffaloes had churned up the soil into bottomless liquid mud, and had also pared down the slimy sides of the small pyramids on which the bushes stood, so that with almost every painful inch I gained I lost my balance and subsided sideways into the mud.

The snipe, however, were there in vast numbers, and with every

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reverberating squelch as I drew a foot from the viscous mud there was an answering squelch as a score of snipe rose within easy range. If the going had been in any way normal; if the cartridges had held out; and if I had been an Olympic athlete trained to the last ounce to resist fatigue I could have topped the hundred-snipe target with ease, but as it was I was still some twenty-five short of the score when the last cartridge coincided with the last scrap of energy. The other guns far away to the east did not hear my fusillade owing to the wind being in the wrong direction, and when they returned to pick me up they asked, pertinently, why I had not 'walked' across to tell them!

That evening a message was delivered calling me back to El Arish, since a telegram had been received with the notification that a British Airways machine was coming down there for the night, and would I put up the odd sixteen passengers and entertain them? The passengers were one and all of that type which are known to-day as V.I.P.s, but in those days we called them *nas kobar* (big people) or *hess kebirs* (big noises), and on our way home by car the following day I asked the cook, now in his normally sunny mood, what we should feed them on. After a lengthy argument we decided on a novel dish for Egypt—a steak and kidney pudding which should contain only a modicum of steak, a generous ration of kidney, at least thirty snipe and, last but not least, some five dozen oysters. Having come to this decision we turned off our road to buy the oysters and kidney in Port Said, and that evening in the kitchen the cook showed me a vast pot on the stove, in which was boiling the finest pudding ever seen outside the walls of the Cheshire Cheese in Fleet Street.

Ten minutes later the telephone bell rang and I was informed that the V.I.P.s had changed their minds, and were going straight on to Cairo, giving me and the snipe and oysters a miss in haulk, so that night one solitary diner sat down to take a small helping from the largest pudding Egypt has ever produced. It would be some consolation to me to know that those V.I.P.s are now in England eking out their existence on the microscopic ration of

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meat allowed each week, and realise what they missed in a desert land.

There are on the panels and walls of the many tombs in Egypt frescoes and bas-reliefs of most of the birds that are indigenous or migrants to the Nile Valley, and, as a general rule, the draughtsmanship and colouring of the varieties depicted are so excellent that one is able to recognise the bird at a glance and make a reasonable assessment of the game situation in days B.C. In fact, one might go so far as to say that the majority of them are so true to life that they might figure as illustrations to a modern ornithological work.

Among them are practically all the varieties of geese and duck that visit the country during the winter migration, together with the various antelopes and other animals which once were common in the deserts on either side of the narrow strips of cultivation along the banks of the Nile, but which now have become comparatively rare. One that appears on many tombs is the big heavily-built addax, which now unfortunately is extinct so far as Egyptian deserts are concerned, and I believe that the last specimen was shot by a Light Car Patrol in the neighbourhood of Siwa Oasis during the 1914-18 war.

The reason for the portrayal of all these animals and birds on the tomb of some defunct king or potentate was that the designer endeavoured to depict on the panels surrounding the casket enclosing the mummy, and on the walls of the underground chamber in which it was placed, a brief history of the dead man's life. In the case of eminent government officials, a scene that is usually depicted is a long queue of the local inhabitants approaching the imposing office chair on which the 'Big Noise' is seated, and carrying with them or leading gifts of dead and live-stock. One is left to imagine whether in those days taxes were paid in kind, or whether the over-officialled country folk found it expedient to offer bribes to the man who could control their destinies.

This is a reasonable view to take, since bribery goes hand in hand with too much control, and from time to time in this country we hear of police court cases where some minor official has received a



Frescoes on the tomb of an Egyptian notable.

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useful joint of pork in return for closing his eyes, and his ears also, to the illegal slaughter of an unrecorded pig. Also, in my early days in Egypt, it was not unusual for both the plaintiff and the defendant to appear in court with an offering for the presiding magistrate's dinner-table, and if one of the litigants produced a turkey he was reasonably sure of winning the case if his opponent could only put up a duck or a cockerel.

One of the most interesting of these many frescoes is that in the tomb of Ne-fer-mat at Medum, and the craftsman who made the drawings and carried out the work excelled himself, since all the pictures of the many birds and animals on the panels are masterpieces of Egyptian art. Ne-fer-mat, one gathers from the script in ancient Egyptian and from the various scenes depicted, was a very senior official in the Ministry of Agriculture—possibly the Minister himself—and one concludes that, although he did a certain amount of inspection of lands, crops and domestic animals, he seems to have spent far more time driving about in a government chariot to chosen spots where he could hunt antelope, or wait for flights of duck and geese on the marshes. It seems reasonable to suppose that the idea of using government vehicles for private purposes originated in Egypt in the very early B.C.'s.

The main panel in this tomb is a veritable work of art, which depicts six geese that are easily identified. On the left, there is a bean goose grazing contentedly, then a pair of white-fronted geese with their heads erect, then facing in the opposite direction, and also with their heads erect, a pair of the very rare red-breasted geese, and finally on the extreme right another bean goose, which, like his companion on the left, is grazing the herbage. This particular panel, which dates back to 3000 B.C., has always interested ornithologists since it proves that the three varieties of geese were known in the Nile Valley in those far-off days, and that the red-breasted, which is a very rare migrant and seldom seen at the present time, apparently figured in Ne-fer-mat's bag when he went shooting.

Recently, an expert wildfowler, who is also something of an Egyptologist, published an interesting theory concerning this

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fresco, and this is that the two bean geese, a bird that can be domesticated, were Ne-fer-mat's tame decoys, and that the two white-fronted and two red-breasted geese were wild birds that had been lured down to the surface of the marsh by the decoys. This is suggested by the fact that while the two bean geese are feeding unconcernedly the four birds of the wild varieties are still very much on their guard, as is shown by their alert stance, and all those who have stalked geese on the estuaries will know how very alert this stance can be. The suggestion is that this panel depicts a very memorable day in Ne-fer-mat's sporting life, when, as a Ministry of Agriculture official, he went out to inspect some farm-lands with a view to finding a building site for some more pyramids, and told his orderly to put the bow and arrows and decoy geese in the back of the government chariot in case he found time for a little relaxation and sport. Presumably he finished his inspection quite early in the day, and later when on the marshes had the good fortune to bag a couple of white-fronted geese, which are always worth having, and then achieved something in the nature of a sporting record by bringing off a right and left at a pair of the very rare red-breasted geese.

Another most interesting bird fresco is in the famous tomb of Ti, which is the first antiquity the tourist to Egypt is taken to see after he has done the Pyramids and the Sphinx. This shows a number of grey cranes, a bird which during the northward migration alights in the deserts near the Nile in great flocks numbering several hundreds. At the present time no one is particularly interested in these cranes since they do not figure as a sporting bird, and presumably, although their meat may be regarded as just edible, the inhabitants of Egypt do not consider them worth the trouble of shooting or trapping. Incidentally, I am by no means sure that the shooting of them would be an easy matter. During my wanderings by car in the deserts, I have frequently seen a large grey patch in the distance, which as I drew near proved to be a flock of some five hundred cranes resting in the open during the flight to the north, but invariably on the approach of the car they have risen from the ground and

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made off at a great height, so that they offered not the slightest chance to a man with a gun.

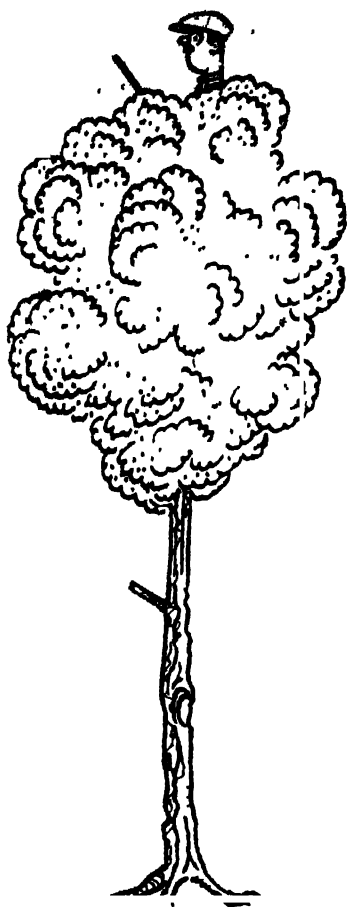
On the fresco in question in the tomb of Ti there is depicted a small flock of these cranes, which are being hand-fed by two men who are opening the birds' long beaks, and ramming food down their throats in the manner that used to be adopted in this country by our poultry-keepers when they wished to put really fat cockerels on an appreciative market. The interest in this particular fresco is that it constitutes the only record in existence which proves that the crane was once domesticated and bred to figure as a table bird, and I hesitate to mention it since I do not want to put ideas into the head of the Minister of Food. We have had in this country during the last few years our fill of unpalatable foodstuffs from overseas, and I would not like to be held responsible for roast crane figuring at the Christmas dinner this year, in place of the usual roast turkey.

A TEST OF SKILL

From time to time one reads arguments in the correspondence columns of some of our journals as to what species of game it is that offers the most difficult shot: the very high pheasant crossing over a narrow valley to the wood on the hill behind, the low-flying partridge which shoots through a gap in a high hedge, the driven grouse which soars upwards from the heather as it nears the line of butts, the snipe jinking over the marshes, or the white-fronted goose that appears to be flying slowly but is faster on the wing than any other variety of wild-fowl. I have missed my fair share of all these, and the conclusion to which I have come is that it depends very largely on the experience that one has had with the different varieties under these conditions. That is to say the jinking snipe is not very difficult if one is constantly walking them up in the marshes and water-meadows and knows more or less when they are going to jink, while the very high pheasant is comparatively easy for those who have specialised in shooting pheasants in hilly country, and have learnt instinctively how far ahead to hold.

My own experience with wild pigeon causes me to place it high on the list of birds capable of holding their own against both the individual sportsman, and the machinations of Agricultural Committees who endeavour to keep their numbers down on account of the damage they cause to crops. Some years ago I shot pigeons in the north of Ireland from lides constructed some sixty feet up in lofty trees, and found it a most satisfactory method as nearly every bird which came in to roost was within easy shot. It requires something of this nature, most carefully camouflaged in the branches, to outwit the wily pigeon, whose first flight into the trees where he intends to roost is almost invariably at a height which puts him out of range from the ground, and his return swoop downwards half a

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minute later seems usually to come from an unexpected quarter, catching the gunner on the wrong foot, or the wrong way round so that things never pan out quite as they should. In other words, the evenings when the pigeons come in as and where we would have them are almost as rare as the days on which the trout rise properly.

In the south of England, where usually there is a suitable clump of trees for roosting on almost every half-mile of the countryside, it is difficult to select the particular spinney which the pigeons have selected for the night's quarters. On the occasion when one has chosen the right place the first few shots seem to warn the birds over a wide area that the wood is dangerous, and the various flights coming in from the stubbles and seed corn wheel off to the right or left to some neighbouring plantation which is unoccupied.

The most satisfactory place for pigeon shooting that I know is North Caithness where, although there are a considerable number of birds, particularly during the Scandinavian migration season, there are no indigenous woods available in which they can roost, for this is a treeless land. The pigeon flocks must of necessity go to one or other of the few sycamore or conifer clumps, planted in more or less recent years round the various country houses in the vicinity, and therefore when one goes out for the evening flight one is reasonably certain of having all the shooting one wants, while the

high winds that prevail in this unsheltered bit of country cause the birds to fly in low.

In the matter of uncertainty of movement the pigeon reminds one of his cousin, the sand-grouse of the East, which seems to select by instinct a new watering-place every time an effort is made to deal with him in his usual spot. In the days when I shot the Senegal variety in the Libyan oases, and later the coroneted and imperial in Sinai, I would locate previously the exact pool where the birds had been coming down to drink for the last week, only to see on the selected morning pack after pack winging in from the desert, clean-cut against the morning sky, and one and all swinging off to some overlooked water half a mile away. The only occasions when the sand-grouse seemed to come right for me were on those early mornings when, returning from a partridge or duck shoot with about half a dozen cartridges left in the bag, or gunless from a night patrol, I happened on the entire population over a wide area flocking down to some tiny pool, and almost queuing up for their water ration.

During the last few years, however, I have come into contact with a creature of the wild that to my mind is far more difficult to hit than any of these recognised tests of one's skill with the gun, and this is the grey squirrel when it is travelling at speed through the top branches of small birch trees, hazels and willows. The reason for this is the rate at which it is travelling, and the direction in which it is heading, vary at frequent intervals, and one is given no previous warning that a change of speed or route is intended. The squirrel may be logging about 20 knots as it bounds along a moderately thick horizontal branch of a hazel, but when one presses the trigger and the charge of shot reaches the spot the animal has jumped off the main branch, and is climbing up a side shoot at an angle of forty-five degrees. Then, at the moment when the second barrel is fired, it takes off from the slender, swaying twigs, and soars through the air like a flying bat to the branches of the next tree on its route to safety. By the time one has reloaded it is out of the danger zone among the heavy timber of a big beech or oak, where it can remain

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in perfect safety, hiding behind a thick branch and watching the man with the gun until he gives up the hunt in disgust.

I obtain quite an amount of practice with these aggravating shots, at the time of the year when the grey squirrels from the wood beyond travel by an overhead route to my filbert and cobnut trees. The animals run a considerable amount of risk in these raids, since my Scottie spends his whole time when indoors watching the trees for that violent agitation among the leaves which denotes a squirrel on its way through the branches, and when he detects a sign of one of the vermin he trembles violently with excitement, and emits slight squeals to tell me to get the gun. He has learnt by experience that it is fatal to bark, since, if he adopts this method of warning me that game is afoot, the squirrel returns at once to the dense cover of the wood, where it is safe from both man and dog. The disappointing part about this squirrel campaign, which continues throughout the year, is that apparently it has not the slightest effect in reducing the numbers of the pest. My average bag during the last two years has been at least three grey squirrels a month, and some of my neighbours who have sons in their 'teens have done very much better, but the grey squirrel continues to flourish everywhere.

The persistent creatures must have marked palates for high-quality nuts, because, although the many wild hazels in the hedgerows and woodlands may be bearing heavy crops, they pay little attention to these and concentrate on the four trees of the superior varieties that are growing in my garden. All these can be watched from the windows of the house, and even during a gale that sways the branches violently it is easy to detect the sudden oscillations which a climbing squirrel causes among the leaves. It is, however, not as easy so to make one's approach with the gun that one arrives in time to get a shot at the animal before it reaches one of the neighbouring big oaks or beeches, behind one of the branches of which it can hide without risk of detection.

The grey squirrels, when they judge that the coast is clear for a nut raid, usually make their way to the trees along the ground, but when they are alarmed at the approach of a human being with a gun,

they always adopt the overhead route, springing from branch to branch until they reach safety. To make this more difficult I cut down several small birch and ash trees and trimmed back the branches of some hazels on the airway line of retreat, but discovered to my cost shortly afterwards that I had considerably underestimated the distance that a grey squirrel can jump. The gap across which the animal leapt on my sudden appearance was over 12 ft., which seems an amazing feat, since its take-off was the extreme end of a slender swaying twig and its alighting point another twig of the same type. In imitation of the sports official who alters the height of the bar after every successful effort during a high-jump competition, I increased the width of the squirrel's jump by another three feet by cutting back the branches, and at the next attempt, a few hours later, there was a hearty round of applause from one of the spectators, namely myself. This was not because the competitor succeeded in improving on his previous jump, but because he failed; and, unfortunately for him, the other spectator, the Scottish terrier, was waiting for him below with open jaws.

I do not think the grey squirrel receives a very warm welcome in any part of England to which it may penetrate, and recent reports of its steady infiltration towards the west and south-west suggest that in a very few years it will have spread over the whole country. One of the main reasons for my dislike of them is that this grey tree rat has eliminated the most attractive feature of the garden and the small wood adjoining—a pair of red squirrels who had their drey on a birch branch in full view of the dining-room window, and who for ten years had regarded themselves as important members of the family. Before the grey variety moved across the New Forest in a mass migration to its westward boundaries and beyond in 1947 hardly a day passed when one or other of the red squirrels did not put in an appearance and provide proof that for some reason he was attracted to the human species, and even took a playful interest in the movements of the human's constant companion, the dog.

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The Scottie of those days was a keen rodent- and rabbit-hunter, but I think he looked upon the red squirrels who made faces at him round the trunks of the trees as harmless jokes, and on the whole quite liked them. One of the many things that an intelligent dog knows instinctively is the light in which Master regards the various creatures and birds of the countryside, so that, if Master appears to think that the death sentence is merited, the dog is only too delighted to carry out the execution, or lend his assistance, but if that inexplicable human apparently esteems some creature of the wild the dog will try to see things in the same light.

These charming little red squirrels showed no marked preference for the filberts and Kentish cobs, and though they helped themselves to a few of them, the number they took was never more than the *ushur*, the one-tenth of the crop which the Mohammedan faith decrees is a reasonable tax that all good Muslims should pay willingly. The grey squirrels, which have replaced the red variety, regard the *ushur* as entirely inadequate and, being imbued with modern ideas on taxation, take more than half the crop on their first visit, with the fixed intention of taking the remainder if the opportunity offers!

My present Scottie, brought up as he has been in an atmosphere of grey squirrel detestation, has as the result got grey squirrels on the brain, and every hour or so he makes a tour of the house looking out of the various windows in the hope of seeing a grey shape among the hazels round the lawn. When out for his walks he pays far more attention to the trunks and branches of the trees overhead than he does to the clumps of bracken and gorse by the wayside, and his mind is obviously devoted to the cause of *Whizzee* elimination. *Whizzee*, which is a corruption of 'Where is he?', is the name by which the grey squirrel is now known, and arises from the occasions when, in obedience to urgent calls from the Scottie, I have rushed out of the house with the gun, and have asked that important question of the small black fellow careering round the tree trunks and staring into the branches overhead. All those who are pestered by the grey squirrel and who endeavour to shoot it will probably

agree that *Whizze* is a very suitable name for an animal that shoots up tree trunks at an amazing speed, and springs across from the top-most branches of one beech to the next, while the question 'Where is he?' is constantly asked in vain.

It is only of recent years that active steps have been taken to deal with this vermin, but the grey squirrel has already perfected its technique of preserving its life by remaining invisible to the man with the gun. When danger is imminent it lies flat on the far side of a tree trunk or branch watching its enemy below, and counteracts his every movement by sliding round cautiously to the right or the left so that at no time does it offer the smallest target, or, in fact, give the slightest indication that it is still in the tree. It is only on the rare occasions when it is caught napping on the open lawn, or in the fragile branches of sapling birches, that there is any chance of success with a charge of No. 5's, and once it reaches a full-sized oak, beech or elm, one may return to the house with the consolation that at any rate one has not got to clean a gun fouled by firing a 6d. cartridge at a worthless vermin.

Bearing in mind my own difficulties in hunting squirrel with modern weapons, I was most interested when, on turning over the pages of Gerald Lascelles's *Thirty Five Years in the New Forest*, a volume which has been on my bookshelf for about the same period, I discovered an item of historical and local interest which previously I had overlooked. This is that during the author's connection with the Forest, and at about the time when he first took up his appointment as Deputy Surveyor in 1880, the red squirrel was very plentiful everywhere, and that shortly before Christmas the foresters organised hunting parties in the woods for these animals, which the authorities of those times permitted. As Lascelles states, this was a very ancient form of chase pursued on quite primeval lines, because the squirrel, when located in the tree, was not shot with a gun, but brought down by the use of that very primitive weapon, the throwing stick, which every forester carried in his pocket in those days. One gathers from his reminiscences that Lascelles, as the man responsible for the maintenance of game on the Forest, took rather

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a poor view of the throwing stick, except on squirrel-hunting occasions.

These throwing sticks were of two types: the early model, the squail, which probably dated back to the time of William the Conqueror, was a 15-in. length of some pliant wood with a ball at the end made from a heavy hardwood, whereas the more modern type, known as the snogg, was slightly larger, with a head of hammered lead or some other metal. As one would expect, the old hands who used the squail were contemptuous of the new invention, which the youth of those days preferred, and, to quote from the book: 'The users of these forms of minor artillery have their controversies over their respective merits, just as shooting men will argue over the respective virtues of the one-trigger gun over the older form of fowling-piece. But whichever is used, the wielder of the "snogg" or "squail" can make surprisingly good practice with it up to as much as fifty yards; to see them fetch a squirrel out of the top of the highest beeches, sometimes as he bounds from one branch to another, or again as he flattens himself for concealment against the trunk of a tree at ninety feet up, is a perfect revelation.' When the day's sport came to an end at dusk a great congregation of squirrel hunters would meet together for a convivial evening at one of the local public houses, where they ate a supper at which a giant squirrel pie figured as the main dish.

All of this goes to prove how quickly and thoroughly old country customs have died out since Victorian days, for, although I number among my acquaintances members of most of the well-known Forest families, the Seymours, the Shutlers, the Streets, the Vincents and others, I can find only one who has any recollection of these squirrel hunts and of the squails and snoggs which their grandparents threw with such skill at these animals, and according to Lascelles's reminiscences at other game as well. Also, unfortunately for the situation that exists in the Forest to-day, nobody in these times regards any member of the squirrel family as a possible foodstuff. The present Deputy Surveyor of the New Forest, who has to deal with the grey squirrel plague, and who was responsible for the elimination of no



An old hand contemptuous of a modern invention.

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fewer than seven thousand last winter, would be only too delighted if the old enthusiasm for the sport and the palate for the animal's flesh could be revived.

Lascelles states in his book that the red squirrel was most abundant in the New Forest in the early days of his service, but that there was an epidemic later which reduced their numbers very considerably. This probably was the reason why the sport died out, since the squirrel population apparently never re-established itself after this epidemic during the 80's. I have known the New Forest well for some forty years, but at no time during that period has this small animal been really plentiful. One might in the course of a day's wanderings notice two, or possibly three, red squirrels in the woodlands, but one certainly never saw from ten to fifteen jumping through the branches of one small plantation, as one does the grey squirrel to-day.

The only place where I recollect seeing red squirrels in some numbers was in the plantations at Hyde, Major Radclyffe's property in East Dorset, where so far the grey squirrel has not yet penetrated. I am unable to compare the situation there to-day with what I remember it to have been, because most of the old plantations have ceased to exist. There was extensive felling of the trees during the war, and almost immediately afterwards a most disastrous forest fire made a complete sweep of some hundreds of acres of woodlands. The red squirrels were particularly plentiful at Hyde, because Major Radclyffe, and his father before him, had a marked liking for them, so that they were never shot in the interests of forestry. The red squirrels apparently appreciated the situation, because if one walked through the woods with a gun in pursuit of wood-pigeons, one would often be followed by a pair of the animal, in the trees, who with the inquisitiveness of their race were taking an interest in one's movements.

Only on one occasion do I remember blaming grey squirrels for misdeeds of which they proved to be innocent. In a neighbouring orchard there are several filbert and cob trees, and, as on my own holding, there was evidence, provided by broken shells, that raids

were being made on the ripening nuts. These shells were not lying under the filbert trees, but beneath a near-by oak, and since grey squirrels were suspected there also, the gardener lay in wait with his gun for their arrival. It was discovered, however, that in this particular case the squirrels were not guilty, but that the culprit was a great spotted woodpecker, which, as a rare and highly decorative visitor, was rightly regarded as entitled to a rake-off of filberts, or any other garden produce. The bird was snipping off the nuts from the filbert trees and carrying them to a horizontal branch of the oak, where there was a suitable crevice in the bark in which they could be inserted for cracking.

The amusing part of the incident was that the woodpecker was either in too much of a hurry, or not particularly skilful at the work, so that a filbert was frequently knocked out of the crevice and fell to the ground. Here, waiting for the 'crumbs' that fell from the other fellow's table, was a nuthatch, which immediately swooped on the fallen nut, carried it off to its private shell-cracking plant, which presumably was more efficient, and was back in position again and ready for another consignment from above immediately the woodpecker started to deal with the next filbert.

I have managed to discover only one good point about the grey squirrel, and this is that its corpse makes a most efficient bird-scarer, for a defunct member of the species lodged in the tops of the pea-sticks, or propped up in a life-like position among the strawberry and raspberry rows, will effectively scare off the birds that specialise in green peas and soft fruits. It has, of course, no lasting properties, and in warm weather must be replaced every three or four days, but since the supply of the vermin is, as our pest officers have discovered, inexhaustible, this presents no great difficulty.

CHAPTER 5

DAYS WITH THE BIRDS

Throughout the drab dull months of autumn and winter I always look forward to the opening day with the dry-fly on the local chalk-stream, and in my mind's eye it is always going to be perfect in every way. The weather will be mild; with just a hint of sun towards mid-day to warm up things generally and accelerate the hatch of March browns; the water will be high, but not too high; the wind, if any, will be slightly south-east, as from this point of the compass it helps with upstream casting; and the bull will not be with the cows in the big water-meadow. I do not understand why the bull should resent my presence on the river's bank and interfere with my fishing, since I do not interfere with his cows, or, in fact, take any notice of them. I do not know for certain if he is a dangerous bull and will really attack, for I have never waited to see, but I find it difficult to concentrate on a rising trout when a large animal with massive withers, and sharp horns set at the right angle for impaling human beings, is coming across the field towards me with moans of annoyance.

In most counties the herd bull leads what one might call a semi-bachelor existence in a private stall, but in Dorset it is the age-old custom for him to run always with the cows. Since I am not a dairyman I am not in a position to argue the merits of the two systems, but as a fisherman I prefer the bachelor bull method. I believe one of the arguments in favour of the Dorset custom is that, if the bull is always with his cows he is in a better temper and more amenable generally, but on the days when I meet him I think he must have had words with one of his wives.

The first thing that I usually see on my arrival at the river's bank is a pair of herons fishing one of my favourite runs, and this is one of the occasions when my feelings as an angler are in direct opposition to my regard for birds. The heron figures among the birds on

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the Protected List, but I have never yet heard any convincing argument in favour of this concession since, so far as I know, the heron in trout stream areas lives exclusively on fish, and has, moreover, a very large appetite. Also, in the parlance of the nursery, 'his eyes are larger than his stomach', and it is quite a common occurrence to find lying on the bank with a deep wound in its back the 2 lb. trout



from the pool below the willow, which one hoped to catch one evening, and which has proved too large for the heron's gullet. I believe the counsels for the defence of the heron argue that he prefers eels to trout, and that eels are not desirable in a chalk-stream. Against this is the undeniable fact that the eel seldom moves about in the shallows in daylight and the trout does, and the heron, like ourselves at the present time, has to content himself, not with the food he prefers but that which he can get.

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One has to admit that no river-keeper, riparian owner, or fisherman ever worries much about the law protecting the heron, and if the bird offers a chance when one is carrying a gun and not a rod the death sentence is usually carried out. The heron, however, is by no means a fool, and if he detects a black shining barrel beneath the arm of the approaching human being, he rises with a loud squawk of alarm to warn his relatives who may be at work at a distance of well over two hundred yards.

A bird that I meet frequently when fishing is the mallard duck, and it has often occurred to me in the spring and summer, when I am carrying a rod, what a very fine head of wild-fowl my stretch of chalk-stream harbours, and what a poor holding ground it is for all varieties of duck once the shooting season has begun. On one occasion when I was just rounding the bend of the small stream to the stretch where there are a series of likely pools, in which trout always lie, a duck flopped heavily off the bank and fell into the water with a splash. I did not see her ducklings, and imagine she had given them strict instructions to 'stay put' whilst she led the fool of a human being away on a wild-duck chase downstream. Playing the part of a sorely-wounded bird, she flapped and floundered down the centre of the quiet stretch, churning the water into foam, and, realising that the trout would require some time to recover from the alarm caused by the disturbance, I sat down to fill and light my pipe.

When later I picked up my rod again to try for a fish which had just started to feed at the bottom of the stretch, the duck came flying low upstream again and, seeing me still on her preserves, fell heavily into the water to repeat her histrionic efforts. I thought that this time she was rather over-playing the part, as no bird with one broken wing and at least one broken leg would possibly thresh the water so vigorously. On the third occasion when this happened about a quarter of an hour later, I do not know who was the more annoyed—myself at being unable to fish the likeliest stretch on the stream because a duck was fool enough to misjudge my intentions, or the mallard at having been disturbed by an unobservant fool,

who was too silly to realise that a badly-wounded duck was available for his dinner.

On my way downstream after my experiences with the duck I met a pair of swans on the next stretch of the water and, though I appreciate this graceful bird as a decorative adjunct to an ornamental lake or big river, it is most certainly out of place and undesirable on a small trout stream. The surging indignant progress of the pair down the little stream caused waves similar to the stern wash of a destroyer, and to add a convincing touch to a most ornithological, as opposed to a piscatorial day, they put up at the next bend a cormorant who has no possible right on an inland stream, nor, if he had his deserts, on any water at all whether salt or fresh.

After this experience it was with a sneaking sympathy for the wrongdoers that I read the other day of a police case in which two wildfowlers were prosecuted and fined for shooting two swans on a sewage farm, and in the course of the hearing the counsel for the Director of Public Prosecutions submitted that the defendants knew that these unmarked swans belonged to the Crown. He went on to explain that the wild swans that could be shot were to be found on the coast in completely different circumstances, and were of another variety. It was explained that the law governing the Crown's ownership of swans dates back to 1592 so that virtually every swan seen inland belongs to Her Majesty, but it is presumed that this does not apply to the birds on the Thames, which belong to the Dyers and Vintners Companies, nor to those from certain private swanneries such as that of Lord Ilchester's at Abbotsbury in Dorset.

The swans to which the counsel for the prosecution referred as wild birds were presumably of the whooper and Bewick varieties, which occasionally visit estuary waters in this country as winter migrants, but apparently all the mute swans in this country, if they do not bear a mark on their beaks showing private ownership, belong *ipso facto* to Her Majesty. I imagine that this ruling dates back to the reign of Richard Cœur de Lion who first introduced the mute swan to this country from Europe, presumably as a table bird,

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for in those far-off days a swan was regarded as such a delicacy that only kings were permitted to eat it.

There are very few birds, to which one can apply the adjective 'edible', that have increased in numbers during the last ten years of acute meat shortage, but the swan would seem to have achieved this, since I now see pairs of them with families of cygnets on a number of rivers and small streams in the south of England where they have never nested previously. Seeing that in many parts of the country the lapwing has been almost exterminated, the moorhen no longer scurries out from the rushes on every ten yards of the river's bank, and the ubiquitous rabbit in some districts has been thinned out to such an extent that it is now one of the rarest of our animals, it seems remarkable that a bird which provides such a very large meal has been allowed to increase on waters where its presence is not welcome.

In the eyes of many people, the swan is one of our most beautiful birds and nothing delights them so much as the sight of a pair of them slowly swimming up a river or across a lake, but there are, on the other hand, quite a number who do not view the bird in quite the same light. If one is interested in the encouragement of wild duck on a private water, or the well-being of trout in a small chalk-stream, a pair of swans in residence is highly undesirable. One quite fails to appreciate their beauty when one sees the male bird assisted by his mate making ferocious attacks on any mallard, or teal, who is presumptuous enough to think of nesting within half-a-mile of the swans' chosen haunt.

For the last two years I have had to put up with the presence of a pair of swans, which have taken over the riparian rights on a mile stretch of the chalk-stream in which I am interested. As the result, there has been a marked falling off in the duck population on the length of river during the shooting season, while again and again the disturbance that they cause on the water has completely ruined all prospects of catching fish on some of the best stretches of the stream when the trout are in a mood to rise freely.

Their nuisance value was ably demonstrated to me one day



Richard Cœur de Lion who first introduced the mute swan.

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towards the end of last May when the mayfly had been on the water for a fortnight or more, so that the trout were not rising to them all day as is the case when the hatch first starts earlier in the month. My intention was to put in a couple of hours on the stream at 7 p.m., the hour when the fish usually have an evening meal on the spent insects, which after a day of glorious hectic life flop back on to the water in an exhausted state. The mayfly's one day of life as a winged insect is full of incident and excitement. As he rises from the bed of the stream, where he has existed as a grub for many boring months, he runs an even-money chance of being taken by a trout on his way up, and when he reaches the surface to give his initial flutter with his beautiful new wings the odds are about two to one against him, because, in addition to trout in the water below, there is the added risk from the swallows and martins in the air above who are waiting to swoop down on him.

If he escapes these dangers and manages to start his first flight, there are wagtails on the bank and chaffinches in the willows waiting for him, so that only a small percentage of the insects hatched during the morning survive for the great event of the day, the mayfly dance in a corner of a meadow at sunset, and this is not exactly peaceful and satisfactory since there are never enough lady partners for the assembled gentlemen so that 'cutting-in' is rampant. No sooner has a male mayfly picked up an alluring female and started a graceful *pas de deux* in the air than another male taps him on the shoulder, and with an 'excuse me' whirls off with the girl to some sitting-out place in the trees. As there is invariably a big flight of swallows, martins and swifts circling round on the outskirts of the mayfly gathering the odds against an engaged couple reaching a sitting-out place are in the region of five to one, so that the mayfly who has lost his partner has the satisfaction of knowing that it does not always pay to be lucky in love. Then when it is all over the married couples, together with the disgruntled bachelors, fly wearily back to the stream to flop on to the water in a state of complete exhaustion, and this is when the trout who missed them in the morning get another chance.

This was the state of affairs that I confidently expected to find when on a warm and calm evening I set forth to catch my breakfast for the following morning. On my arrival at the river there was a marked rise of fish to the dying insects taking place on my chosen stretch, but as I walked through the rushes to make my first cast over a feeding trout, the pair of swans with their four cygnets launched themselves from the bank, and carried out a most spectacular fleet movement in line abreast upstream.

The six birds covered the whole breadth of the stream from bank to bank, stirring up the mud on the shallows and churning through the weed banks beneath which the trout were lying, and they completely and contemptuously ignored my attempts to turn them back. The only thing I could do in the circumstances was to walk slowly up behind them, see them right off that particular stretch into a side-channel that feeds the mill, and return to my starting-point.

I wasted twenty minutes of my precious time doing this, and 'precious' is the adjective to use in this connection for the evening rise is of a most ephemeral nature, as all those who fish for trout will agree, but when I returned to my starting-point with my soul full of hope, I found the complete dairy herd of thirty-odd cows, together with the bull, standing in single file in the stream, cooling off after a hot day in the meadow. Nor were the evening's frustrations yet come to an end. My final casts, made on my way home over what looked like a most business like rise close under the overhanging bank, were made in vain. After five uneventful minutes I noticed the water rat, author of the loud plop and resulting deep dimple, sitting on the offside bank, his face twitching with suppressed merriment!

CHAPTER 6

TROUT AND TIDDLERS

One of my cheap amusements is looking over river bridges at other people's trout that lie in the shadow of the overhead masonry, and, playing the game of 'let's pretend', I see myself from a position on the bank downstream flicking a perfectly cocked blue-winged olive on to the water beneath the arch so that the fish has no alternative but to take it without the slightest hesitation. It is, of course, a most childish amusement, with a marked element of make-believe in it, since I have no doubt other anglers stand on the brick bridge on my bit of chalk-stream and, seeing my old acquaintance, Richard, lying in his usual spot in the shadow of the arch, imagine themselves doing precisely the same thing; but I can assure them that Richard is not going to take a blue-winged olive, or anything else that is offered to him.

Whenever I arrive for a day's fishing, I always have a look over the bridge before I get the tackle out of the car to see if Richard is in his usual position, and, seeing me peering over the coping, he begins to rise furiously and noisily to nothing at all. He continues to play the part of a famished trout, who will take anything in the fly-box if it is floated over him, all the time I am putting up the rod and choosing the exact fly to appeal to his palate. There is not the slightest necessity for me to tell fishing readers that this is as far as it goes, for when, after cracking off the barb of the hook of my first selection against the brickwork, I do succeed in the difficult task of putting a fly up the arch over Richard's head, he rushes off shaking with laughter to the trout club, where he relates to other members how he has made a fool of me again; and how he, or his father before him, has been doing all this in precisely the same fashion for very many years.

There was one particularly large trout of this special bridge



Looking over bridges at other people's trout.

variety in a stream in this locality, and having studied him from different angles for several years, I came to the conclusion that not only was he in perfect condition, but that he weighed at least 3 lbs. Whenever I crossed the small bridge that spans this stream, I stopped the car to see if he was in the same position, and he was always there, looking slightly bigger than last time, and he was always feeding heartily. Then one year a small syndicate was formed to take over the fishing rights of this stream, and my decision to become a £20-one-day-a-week-rod on the water was influenced almost entirely by the presence of this fine bridge trout, since I had not a very high opinion of the fishing possibilities of the remainder of the water. Two days before the season started, and before I had written the subscription cheque, I drove over to the stream to make quite

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certain that the main attraction of the water was still available, to find him looking more desirable and hungrier than ever.

On the opening day I was in position below the bridge before any other members of the syndicate had arrived on the scene, and, having put a whole variety of attractive flies over the exact spot where the giant lay without the slightest response, I went on to the bridge to inquire further into the matter, only to find that there was not a sign of him in his usual pool. On the assumption that even a bridge trout cannot be taking flies every hour of the day, and must have a rest in deep water occasionally, I walked upstream with the intention of returning to the bridge later, when I noticed a glint of silver in the long grass on the bank. It was one of those rare occasions when sights are surer than smells or sounds to make heart-strings crack, for lying there, with the greater part of its back eaten away, was my £20 bridge trout, and, since the resident otter must have known of the existence of the fish for some time, I felt that he had shown total lack of consideration for me in drawing his ration after, and not before, I had written the cheque.

I realise that, in relating the foregoing tragedy exactly as it occurred, I have upset one of the oldest traditions of angling history. From time immemorial the giant trout under the bridge, after ignoring the efforts of the best dry-fly fishermen in the district with supreme contempt over a number of years, is invariably caught at the first cast by a small boy dangling over his head a lob-worm on a large hook, or sometimes a bent pin. I have read and heard so many stories of this happening that I am led to suppose that small boys equipped with worm tackle, and carrying large trout, are to be met with as frequently on the banks of our streams as are those herons that get up with a squawk from the riverside, leaving behind them the body of a big fish which one had hoped to catch, and which has proved to be too large for their gullets. Although I have spent quite an appreciable time with a rod on rivers' banks, I have never yet met the proverbial small boy with anything much larger than a 3 oz. dace in a jam-jar, and can only conclude that I am most unobservant.

This reminds me of an amusing little poem that appeared in *Punch* a few years ago describing the fishing fleet that sets out from Paddington in perambulators daily bound for the Round Pond fishing grounds, to return towards evening in straggling line ahead, with a record tiddler catch, and a crew that cries for bed. It occurs to me in this connection that, although I have spent much of my spare time with a fishing rod in my hands, I do not know very much about tiddlers. In fact, I am not certain whether a tiddler is another name for a minnow, or whether it is a term that covers the small fry of all fishes. The reason for my ignorance about this important, if juvenile, side of the piscatorial art is that I was very fortunate in my habitat in my youth, for, having spent my early boyhood in a house surrounded by a moat packed with small roach, dace and perch that would take anything offered to them, I had no need to concern myself with tiddlers. Indeed, my attitude towards tiddler-fishers in those days was much the same as that which the owner of a Scottish river holding salmon that average 20 lbs. adopts towards the man who fishes a moorland brook stocked with 8 in. fingerlings.

The result of this is that I am ignorant about the correct way to catch tiddlers, and am uncertain whether in tiddler-fishing circles those who use a rod and line look superciliously at those who wield a net, in much the same way as the dry-fly purist regards the worm fisher. I should think that this is very probable, since, despite the efforts that have been made recently to eliminate all class distinctions, the small boys who hail from Council houses cannot be seen with those who live in pre-fabs, and if one plays rugger one hardly knows what soccer is. Another point about tiddler-fishing is that I believe a bent pin is not absolutely essential, and that a really skilled angler with a highly developed sense of touch can yank them out of the water by using a small portion of bait merely tied to a length of thread, after the fashion adopted by Norfolk Broad fishermen when bobbing for eels with a bunch of lobworms threaded on worsted.

I do not know what the tiddler-fishing conditions were like on the Round Pond in Kensington Gardens during the very droughty

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summer in which the poem appeared in *Punch*, but in other waters things generally were most unsatisfactory. When returning from a hopeless day on our shrunken local chalk-stream towards the end of the trout season I met a friend, who had just come back from Scotland where he had been for three weeks, and he told me that he had not troubled to take his rods out of their cases. 'Not a drop of water anywhere,' was his complaint, and he added that the estuaries were almost choked with salmon and sea trout which moved up daily with the flood to high-water mark, and returned with the tide when they found that there was no improvement in the level of the stream they wished to ascend. Shortly after this encounter I met another, but more youthful, angling friend of mine at the ford over a small stream that flows down from the New Forest, who showed me his empty jam-pot.

'I ain't caught a tiddler all day,' he said sadly. 'The stream's got no water in it, and it ain't no use wasting time fishing for tiddlers this year.'

I can remember catching only two bridge trout in the whole of my angling career, and the largest of these was not really of the bridge variety, since he had spent the whole of his well-fed life in a small brick channel that carried off the overflow from the scullery sink of the village post-office near by. I caught this fellow, who weighed $3\frac{1}{4}$ lbs., when he was trespassing on the preserve of the real bridge trout, who, having only recently taken over the beat, was of no great size.

The other occasion, which was rather regrettable, occurred when a friend took me to a very highly preserved water and, telling me that my beat started at the bridge, left me while he went upstream. Having put up my rod, I flicked my fly on to the pool below the bridge to ascertain if everything was in working order, whereupon a trout of about 2 lbs. surged out from his position below the arch, chased my fly downstream across the pool, and succeeded in firmly hooking himself. I realised why he had behaved in this extraordinary fashion when my friend hurried back to tell me to put the trout back at once, since my beat started above the bridge, and not in the pool

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below, and I had caught the fish on the water of another man who maintained a most efficient secret service system on the river.

As those who fish our southern streams know, there are so many days during the season when, although there may be a quite appreciable rise to the fly, the trout that are feeding are one and all well below the 11 in. or 12 in. limit of the water, so that one spends one's time removing fingerlings from the hook to return them to the river, and the day ends with not one sizable fish to figure on the breakfast table the following morning. Occasionally, these conditions prevail for weeks at a stretch until one begins to wonder if the herons and otters have left a single good trout in the stream.

It was during one of these small-trout-only periods, which had lasted for a month or more, that my wife asked me after lunch if I were going fishing that evening seeing that the weather conditions seemed suitable, and I replied that if she really wanted fish for breakfast I would drive into the town and buy some to make sure of getting it. It was not a bit of use wasting both time and petrol on a visit to the chalk-stream as there was not a hope of catching anything bigger than a salmon parr however good the rise might be.

She then explained that she did not require a trout for breakfast, but only three or four tiny ones, which she wanted to put into a small rock pool that she and the gardener had just made by damming up a spring at the side of the lawn. She thought that goldfish would look out of keeping with the typical English rural conditions that she had contrived with sandstone rocks, polyanthus plants and aubretias around the pool, and that only trout would fill the bill. This was obviously one of those rare occasions when a husband can carry out his wife's wishes satisfactorily in every detail, and, promising her as many small trout as the pool could accommodate, I put my tackle in the car, having first paid a visit to the loft where I was lucky enough to find the old bait-can I thought I had put there several years ago.

On arrival at the river I called on the owner of the water to explain my mission, and to ask his permission to catch half-a-dozen small trout well under the size limit. This he granted readily because in

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his opinion the stream was over-stocked with small fish, and it would do no harm to reduce their numbers slightly.

It was one of those warm still evenings with a good hatch of fly coming down on the surface when all the nursling trout feel the urge of hunger, and dash about the stream snapping up everything that floats down so that the bigger fish do not get a chance. I felt quite convinced that I should succeed in my endeavour since I had experienced so many rises of that nature during the season, and had spent the whole evening extracting hooks from under-sized trout, washing, drying and oiling the fly in preparation for another cast, and then immediately repeating the performance until the light faded.

After I had put up my rod I made my way to a very shallow stickle that I knew from experience never held anything but fingerlings, and, after watching these small fish taking every insect that floated down from the still water above, I dropped my fly in the midst of them. Instead of the immediate splashy rise that I expected my fly was allowed to float down the length of the stickle until it began to drag, and not one of the assembled shoal which were rising on all sides, took the slightest notice of it. The same thing happened with the next six or seven casts, and I then moved up to another shallow where I hoped that the small trout would not be so particular, but here again my fly was totally ignored.

It seemed obvious that the blue-winged olive, which was usually so popular on the water, had gone out of fashion, and that another fly was on the menu that evening. I therefore changed it for a black gnat, which I dropped into a wide shallow run where the water was only about 3 ins. deep, and in which I could see a shoal of trout of the exact size that my wife required for her pool. One of these made a rush for the fly, but before he could reach it a big crested wave shot out from a neighbouring patch of reeds, the fly disappeared in a small whirlpool, the reel screamed and a few minutes later I had landed a well-conditioned trout which was well over the limit, and which weighed $1\frac{1}{2}$ lbs. A very suitable fish to meet on one's plate at breakfast, but not quite the size I wanted that

evening, and in any case he was much too large and lively to go into the small bait-can.

. After this I wandered slowly upstream, and since proof had been afforded that there were still in the water some good fish that were in the mood to take the fly I did not devote all my time to trying for the small fellows. The result was that when the rise began to peter out, and it was time to return to the car, I had three more trout of about 1 lb. weight in the bag, but nothing in the bait-can. On the only occasion when the big-trout-only rule was broken, and I did catch a suitable fingerling; the hook was so deeply embedded in its tongue at the back of the trout that it took me the best part of five minutes to perform the surgical operation of removing it. When this was completed the unfortunate little fish was in such a low state of health, and on the point of death by asphyxiation, that it was doubtful if it would have recovered if placed in the water immediately.

In any case, I was unable to ascertain this because, as might have been expected, I found when I looked behind me that I had left the very necessary bait-can on the bank about a quarter-of-a-mile away while negotiating myself and my rod through one of those very difficult barbed-wire fences, that farmers always erect in fields through which a stream flows.

On my way back to the car, I found the owner of the water waiting for me at the spot where the stream flows round the lawn in front of his house, where all fishing is prohibited.

'Well,' he said, 'I hope you've filled your bait-can. It's been a grand evening for tiddlers. I've been watching them, and the fellow who was fishing the lower water has just gone home in disgust. He's spent the whole time taking small fish off his hook, and has finished up with an empty basket.'

When I explained that, though I had a couple of brace of very nice trout, I had completely failed in my endeavour to obtain anything for my wife's rock pool, he looked worried.

'That's awkward,' he said, 'because she will think that you have done it out of pure cussedness. Drop your fly on that shallow stickle

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below the weir there. It's full of small fellows, and I haven't seen a trout of any size in it for twenty years.'

I obeyed instructions, and my fly floated down over the trout nursery for a short distance until it disappeared in a tiny dimple.

'What did I tell you,' said my friend delightedly. 'You'll find that fellow is just the right size, and when you have caught three more like him—Holy Smoke! What on earth have you got on the end of your line?' And ten minutes later, after a protracted struggle among the many weed-beds, I brought to the net a three-pounder—the record fish for the season.

After this final manifestation of a perverse fate, there seemed nothing for it but to return home and make full confession.

A mass of water weed in which heavy trout bury themselves when hooked is one of the recognised drawbacks to all chalk-stream fishing, and my struggles with it on this occasion have been repeated on other southern rivers more frequently than I can recall. An alternative and greater nuisance is that of cut weed, and on the two small Dorset rivers that I frequented in the past, the Frome and the Piddle, the promising day in June, which had just started with a steady rise of trout in every run, would so often come to an abrupt end when the advance guard of cut weed came floating round the bend. Although the chalk-stream trout lives most of his life under banks of weed, finding much of his food-stuff around the roots, he seems to have a marked objection to it when it is floating in straggling masses overhead, and I cannot recollect a day when a satisfactory rise of trout continued after the weed cut by some upstream riparian owners started to float down through my beat.

My most memorable experience with floating weed occurred in the year 1942, when, owing to the acute shortage of fish, there were on most days of the week lengthy queues at every fishmonger's shop waiting to buy a few travel-worn plaice or strips of stale cod. With hunger as the main incentive I was fishing the Avon for salmon, and after two blank days I hooked to my great delight a good salmon well over the 2 lb. mark, but as I took in the slack line after the first determined rush I suddenly realised that a hatch

upstream must have been opened to let down the accumulated masses of weed representing a week's cutting, which in those days was done by Italian prisoners from Libya. The weed was coming down, not in light straggling masses, but in big solid islands some five feet or more in diameter, and there were so many of these islands that this once-open stretch of the Avon looked like the Ægean Archipelago. It was perfectly obvious that if my active and much-desired salmon found its way under one of these islands, it would mean the end, since nothing less than a good hemp rope could have held the weight of the sodden mass swirling downstream at a steady three miles an hour.

For five nerve-racking minutes I steered the fish away from an island that looked as big as Imbros into the narrow channel of clear water between it and Tenedos, only to find that a far bigger mass, which could only be Mudros, was bearing down on the line. Disaster seemed to be an immediate certainty, and then the salmon, possibly because it disliked weed as much as I did, took it into its head to come out of the main stream and cruise up the near bank of the river. In a flash the water-keeper, who was on the verge of a nervous break-down, was on the spot with his gaff, and the next moment a very surprised salmon, which had not started to fight in real earnest, was lying on the grass of the meadow.

Weed cutting requires an expert successfully to manipulate the underwater scythe, and I was amused recently to hear that a Government Board, in the interests of economy, had experimented on one river with a team of prisoners from the local gaol. The results did not prove entirely successful, and they were forced to the conclusion that the fact that a man is known to be most expert at clearing a till of its contents is no guarantee that he will be equally expert at clearing weeds from the bottom of a river.



CHAPTER 7

RITUAL AND GUN WORSHIP

The worst gale that I remember in the British Isles was that which occurred one April a few years ago, and my opinion of its severity was probably swayed by the fact that it came from the south-east, a point of the compass that always seems to be responsible for a particularly marrow-chilling blast, and also because it happened to coincide with my opening day on the local chalk-stream. It was



certainly not a day that I would have selected for trout fishing, but I had a forestry meeting to attend in the country town contiguous to the river, and, with the idea of killing two journeys with one can of petrol, which was then rationed, I thought I would put in a short hour and a half on the water before the meeting, and another hour afterwards, provided that no one on the committee proved to be very garrulous. Since this meant leaving the water unfished for

the best part of the day I took a friend with me to fill the gap. He is an ex-Indian policeman, and, having lived in an average temperature of about 90 degrees for the greater part of his life, was perhaps not the most suitable choice for the day in question.

When we reached the river, which in my opinion was far too high for successful fishing, it had just started to rain, and the bitterly cold wind from the south-east was blowing, with the promise of something extra special to come. I left my friend at the top of the water,

having given him an opportunity to exercise his discretion and think better of it, and then went down to the lower end, where I proposed to start. The gale by this time having reached, what used to be called in sailing ship days, 'goose-winged topsail' force, with the rain coming down in sheets, I decided that even an unheated committee room would be preferable to the banks of a chalk-stream, and putting my rod back in the car I went on straight to the town.

On the way to the meeting the car was nearly blown off the road on several occasions, the driving rain found its way through a number of previously unknown crevices in the make-up of the old model, and, although it was market day, the town was deserted and babbling brooks two feet wide were running down the main street. This state of affairs lasted until 5 p.m., and when I arrived back at the river the Indian policeman to my surprise was still alive, but looking like some strange aquatic animal of the seal species which had just crawled out of the water. In some mysterious fashion he had managed to catch three trout, but as his raincoat had been blown over his head most of the day and his line and cast had maintained a rigid horizontal position from the top of his rod, he was not very clear as to how this had happened. He was under the impression that in the circumstances none of the trout had been caught on what a purist calls the dry-fly put in a floating position on the top of the water.

This unorthodox method of catching trout would have profoundly upset another fisherman of my acquaintance, with whom some years ago I shared a stretch on a southern chalk-stream for one season. He was apparently the keenest fisherman I have ever met—possibly the keenest in all the world. He had no other topic of conversation beyond angling, he read nothing but fishing periodicals and books on the subject, and he was in constant communication with all the well-known purveyors of rods and tackle. He must have been worth his weight in gold to them. Before the season started I happened to call on him at his house and, on being shown into his study, was under the impression that I had walked into one of the big fishing emporiums in Pall Mall, or St. James's. Stacked in their

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cases along the walls was every type of rod from the short spinning variety for heavy salmon to light 11 ft. split canes for smaller fish and grise, and 17 ft. Connemara dapping rods to 8 ft. miniatures for brook trout. I felt whatever a water might hold—the Loch Ness monster or the smallest burn trout—that here was the man to deal with the situation, since among the innumerable boxes of flies, spoons, minnows, and spinners on every shelf in the room must be the exact form of lure that the fish would take.

If this keen fisherman read in some angling article of a new fly—Somebody's Fancy—which was proving of value on the upper Kennet or the lower Test, he would order not one or two to try, as does an ordinary angler, but a dozen or more of the variety in different sizes. Landing nets of every conceivable type were hung on the walls, whilst his store of various greases and oils to assist the preservative and floating qualities of his lines and flies would have been a godsend to the Minister of Food of those days, who was so desperately short of fats that the representatives of some of the Oriental nations were afraid to visit the British Isles to discuss treaties and other matters.

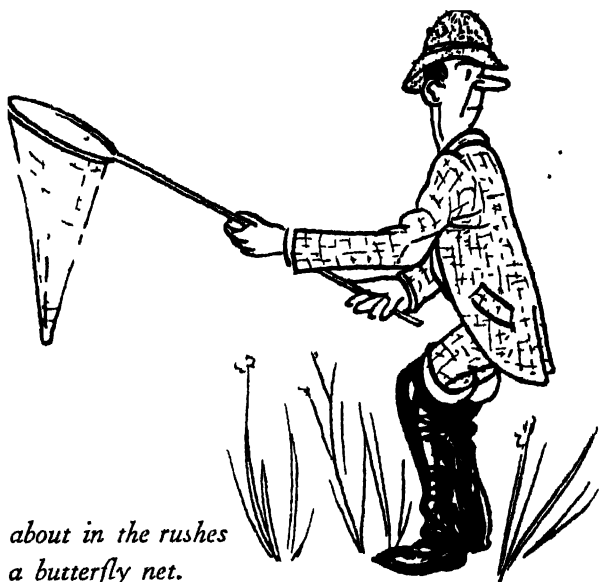
From this description one might think that such an ardent and keen fisherman was the worst possible man with whom to share a short stretch on a trout stream, since a quite ordinary angler like myself, with but three rods and one box of more or less dilapidated flies, would not stand a chance with him on the water. Moreover, seeing that his every thought and action was concerned with fishing, one would naturally jump to the conclusion that he would be on the stream from dawn to dusk on every day of the season with the natural result that the water would be over-fished. Actually, although I visited the stream on most of the likely days that year, I met him once only on the river's bank. It was quite a good evening with trout feeding steadily in all the pools and runs, but, though the rise at that time of the day is a short one and not a moment should be lost, he had not put his rod up, but was fiddling about in the rushes with a small butterfly net.

In reply to the usual query as to his luck, he replied: 'It's not a bit

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of use. I've caught a dozen or more of the natural fly, and they are all blue-winged olives which the trout are taking. It's just the sort of thing that would happen to me—I have brought the wrong boxes of flies, and I haven't a single specimen of the blue-winged olive with me.'

On my suggesting that on a good evening the trout are not very 'choosey' about the fare offered to them and would probably take



*Fiddling about in the rushes
with a butterfly net.*

almost anything of similar size and colour, he looked at me with an expression on his face which suggested he had caught me in the act of eating peas with my knife, or shooting a hen pheasant sitting on her eggs.

'I make a point of using the fly on the water, and nothing else,' he said coldly, and, loading himself up with his paraphernalia consisting of three rods, two landing nets, one butterfly ditto, and a bag big enough for a *Hamla* camel's load, he staggered towards his car.

It is not only fishermen who suffer from this queer kink, and who

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consider that the ritual to be observed with regard to the implements of a pastime are of far more importance than the sport itself, for there are golfers who spend far more time collecting clubs for every conceivable shot, and polishing them up, than they do on the links. In the same way, there are hunting men who possess so many pairs of boots of surpassing beauty as regards cut that the selection of the suitable pair for November 1 causes them to be invariably late at the meet.

In other days, when the state of the larder was not of such vital importance, the men one met out shooting were usually of two types: those who shot for amusement and pastime, and those who, like my late fishing partner, regarded it almost as a form of religion—a very stern and Puritan religion which rigidly excluded anything in the nature of joy and amusement. The latter category—whom one met more rarely, since, owing to their manners generally and their harsh and gloomy outlook on life, there was a tendency for them to drop out of syndicates and private shoots—had apparently no other amusement or interest in life, and their spring and summer were devoted to the constant supervision of the gun in preparation for the days to come in the autumn and winter. One wondered how the unfortunate fowling pieces stood up to the incessant tinkering with their internal mechanism.

I can well recall one gun-worshipping sportsman who apparently had read somewhere of the advisability of sponging out the gun after it had been subjected to a considerable amount of rapid fire. Bearing this admirable advice in mind, he would proceed to sponge out his gun after firing three very intermittent shots at grouse on an almost grouseless moor—the operation usually taking place when the one and only covey on that particular mountain-side was rising from the heather in front.

If I have expressed concern about the guns of these ritual-loving sportsmen, I am still more worried about their unfortunate dogs, for it is not easy for the canine species to see the religious side of anything, and realise that the dogological observances count more than actual deeds. However, my genuine concern for the well-being of

shooting dogs is tempered by the knowledge that I am far from being qualified to express an opinion on this subject, having failed lamentably in the past to impress any of this species with a proper sense of dedication and selflessness.

I have met during my life a number of men who possess the gift of training dogs to work with the gun to perfection, and who when asked to shoot are reminded to bring their dogs—if they should forget their guns it would not matter so much. I, on the other hand, belong to that category of dog-owners who are invited to shoots on the condition that they do *not* bring their dogs. It is, I must admit, entirely my own fault and due mainly to that very common cause, the keeping of terriers as well as the dog who is trained to the gun. This means that in the spring and summer the terriers must be exercised separately, departing from the house to the accompaniment of anguished howls from the solitary occupant of the kennel, and I never could resist canine howls that come from a broken heart. On the other hand, if the dogs are taken for a walk together, the whip or lead must be employed constantly to prevent the trained dog from joining his very undisciplined companions in those delightful hunts up overgrown hedgerows after rabbits. I make all sorts of wonderful resolutions about weakness where dogs are concerned, but they blow away like chaff on the wind immediately I see a dog really enjoying itself.

The first shooting-dog I owned was quite unique, and like none I have had since. He was a Laverack setter given to me in my subaltern days by a senior officer in the regiment, because 'he would not stand to snipe'. As his original owner was more interested in snipe than anything else, it was obvious that a dog who failed to recognise the existence of this small bird was not of much use to him, and so I gave him a home. The kindly donor had told me the truth for the Laverack most certainly did not stand to snipe, but the trouble was he would not stand to anything else! He would work roots, stubble or fallow, ranging in the most perfect setter style, but nothing ever caused him to check his long loping stride: coveys of partridges would rise with a scandalised chatter under his nose, shocked hares

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would jump from their forms to gallop away down a furrow, and pheasants would rocket up from the grass verges, but the old Laverack went on and on and on.

I thought at first that he must be a freak dog without a trace of scenting powers, but later came to the conclusion that ordinary game did not exist for him as he was searching for something he never found. What this unknown thing was I never discovered, for on the rare occasions when he halted and froze during his incessant ranging, there was nothing there that I could see, except that once I thought I detected a suspicious movement at the top of a nearby mole-hill which might have meant that the mole was at work just below the surface. I gave the Laverack away eventually to a dear old maiden lady, who lived near Putney Heath, and who wanted a dog companion. I warned her that 'he would not stand to snipe', but she did not seem to mind this drawback, and I think the Laverack was happy as he was provided with a saddlebag chair by the fireside, lived on the fat of the land, and he was just as likely to find that which he was seeking on Putney Heath as on the most prolific grouse moor in Scotland.

My next shooting-dog was a *very* springer spaniel bitch, named Verity, and I have added the adjective to her variety as I have never before or since seen so much concentrated energy compressed into one small space. Of course, Verity was the very last type of dog that a man of my calibre could handle successfully, but we started off fairly well. She learnt to retrieve at once and there was not the slightest difficulty about this, but, just about the time when it was beginning to dawn on her that a covey of partridges or roving old cock pheasants flushed at a distance of two hundred yards was not of much value to the gun behind, I acquired Clytie.

Clytie was a fox-terrier bitch of most aristocratic stock, and was a quite extraordinary dog in one respect as she was totally lacking in all the endearing qualities which make the canine species the true companions they are. It was quite impossible to feel any real affection for her as it was so patently obvious that she thought of no one but herself, and it is my experience that this is so unusual in the dog

world as to be almost unique. Like so many fox-terriers she was a great hunter, and in fact she thought of nothing else. Her nose was very remarkable and quite infallible, and I discovered that if Clytie accompanied Verity on those marauding expeditions that one makes with one other gun down hedgerows and over gorse-covered downs, nothing in the fur and feather line was ever overlooked however dense the cover, and there was never any time wasted at some tangled gorse and bracken-patch from which the rabbit or pheasant had departed an hour ago.

On the argument that what one loses on the swings one gains on the roundabouts Clytie was enrolled as a shooting-dog, but I discovered that the percentage of gains on the roundabouts were nearly always outweighed by the losses on the swings. The shoot that I had in those days was about a mile and a half of agricultural land along the top and southern slope of a high Dorset down, and so far as partridges, pheasants, and hares were concerned it was usually rather second-rate, sometimes very third-rate, but occasionally surprisingly good. If a bitter nor'-easter had been blowing for two or three days a number of pheasants, several additional coveys of partridges, and an almost incredible number of hares would move on to the sheltered southern slopes from the better-stocked shoots to the north.

On these days everything depended on one's ability to kill stone dead in his tracks every hare that rose from the roots or stubble. Failure meant disaster for, as the hare went away across the bare field, Verity and Clytie, deaf to all whistles and agonised howls, would go raging in pursuit. Other hares would rise as the hunt travelled across the fields, covey after covey of partridges would burst into the air in front of either a hare or a dog, and pheasants flirting their long tails would shoot up from the grass verges, making for home and safety. In about fifteen short but very full minutes the two dogs would clear nearly everything off the arable land, leaving only the rabbits in the gorse for the rest of the day.

It was after one of these disastrous days which might have been so fruitful, that the long-suffering gun who shared the shoot with

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me said: 'Next time we have a nice bitter nor'-easter what about leaving those d—— dogs of yours behind, and seeing what we can do without their help?' There seemed to be something in the suggestion, and, when a week or so later the wind went nor'-east again, we arranged a day. Whilst dressing in the morning I felt guilty and shamefaced when Verity and Clytie, after bursting into my room as usual to find out what clothes I was going to wear, rushed out again on seeing me putting on greasy boots, shouting joyously that it was going to be a fine hunting morn. When, however, I went out after breakfast to play the dirtiest trick that has ever been played on sporting dogs—to shut them in a kennel on what was obviously a shooting day—there was not a sign of the enthusiastic pair. It seemed obvious that their excitement and keen anticipation had been too much for their strength of mind, and that they had gone off on one of their full-day rabbit hunts along the cliffs.

I heaved a sigh of relief that I had been spared the ordeal of 'letting a dog down', which is the worst thing a man can do, and my partner and I set forth with souls full of hope to the downs three miles away. The first field of roots, usually good for something, we found to be surprisingly empty as nothing moved from it, not even a hare; a vast stubble proved to be more empty than it looked; a usually most-productive potato patch held a pair of wheat-ears only; and not a single white scut bobbed into the hedgerows anywhere. Then far off in the distance, ranging madly across the downs, I saw a white streak followed by a brown streak, and the wind carried to my ears excited yaps that could only come from the throats of Clytie and Verity.

It seemed unfair and illogical to chastise them for what was only over-enthusiasm! Any sporting dog will take an interest in the kit his master proposes to wear, and will draw his own conclusions therefrom, but most can be relied upon to display a little more intelligence in their subsequent actions. I once knew a man who, finding his spaniel displayed such persistent interest in his sporting attire, trained him to fetch his slippers for him when, after shooting, he removed his boots in the sitting-room in front of the fire—I may

mention that he was a bachelor. As this was a success he tried, when dressing in the morning, to teach the same dog to fetch the boots or shoes he was going to wear during the day, but this was a failure. Regardless of the rest of his kit—morning coat and striped trousers for a wedding, light lounge suit for a garden party, or yachting attire for a day on the estuary—the footwear produced from the stand was invariably the pair of heavy nailed boots used for shooting.

I have read many articles in our sporting journals on the training of dogs in the pursuit of game, and of accustoming them to work in a proper manner with the gun. It is always pointed out that the greatest care must be taken in the first place to ensure that the dog does not become gun-shy, and when this risk has been overcome the next move is so to train him that he is under strict control while searching for game, and instantly obeys signals given with a wave of the hand or a verbal command. I always read these carefully-written instructions with amusement, because in my particular case the position is completely reversed, and it has always been my dogs that ensure that I do not become gun-shy and who train me to work with that weapon in the way that they desire.

The breed to which I am addicted is the Scottish terrier, a recognised canine autocrat, and though officially they are not regarded as gun dogs every one that I have possessed has shown the greatest devotion to the weapon, and has held the view that, if I were more painstaking and alert, I would never go out into the garden without this essential adjunct to vermin elimination in my hands.

My present Scottie, who has controlled me for the last four years, has not only taken steps to ensure that I am not gun-shy, but has also trained me to work with the weapon in the way he desires. At an early hour of the morning he is on watch downstairs for grey squirrels, running from one window to the next so that he can look over the greater part of the garden and the trees that surround it. Immediately he has detected something that calls for action he bursts into my room with a glint in his eyes, and a most marked cock of his ears, to inform me that he has seen a grey squirrel on the lawn, and that my instant attendance with the gun is demanded. He shows

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marked intelligence and reasoning powers over this since, after indicating that the gun is required by rushing up to it in the corner of my room in which it stands to give it an affectionate lick, he then jumps up to one or other of the windows to show me the spot in which he has seen the animal.

There are two windows in my room, and one looks out on to the lawn while the other provides a view of a rhododendron clump, and the window to which he jumps is the one from which one can see the trespasser. If, however, the animal that he has noticed is in a part of the garden that is not visible from either of my windows he is very fully aware that to jump up to one of them would only mislead me, and he therefore rushes to the door, looking back over his shoulder with an expression on his face which is quite obviously an order to follow him. Whatever I happen to be doing at the time, and even if I am in the middle of shaving, the command has to be obeyed since, although a dog may occasionally be disobedient, he does not expect anything of that nature from the human being that he controls.

CHAPTER 8

CANINE AFFAIRS

The owner of a dog sometimes finds himself wondering how many words of the English language his small friend knows, and to what extent the animal listens in to ordinary conversations between human beings to enable him to get some idea of what is going to happen in the future. A lot depends, of course, on the natural intelligence of the dog, and quite a number of them understand only remarks made directly to them as greetings or commands. I have owned several of this type, including a saluki, two springer spaniels and a fox-terrier, all of which presumably were interested only in canine affairs, and as the result took not the slightest notice of conversations between human beings.

On the other hand, I have had two or three others whose knowledge of the English language was so extensive that, if one wanted to keep the topic of one's conversation secret at the moment when the dog was obviously listening for a clue, it was necessary to spell the vital word that would give the case away, or translate it into French. Actually, in our family the standard of French education is so indifferent that we usually employ Arabic. My present Scottish terrier is a confirmed eavesdropper, and on the occasions when he is listening in I have only to make a casual remark to my wife, such as: 'I saw that stray cat round the chicken-house again,' for him to jump to the window to look for the cat; and a statement that, as the rabbit has been busy among the cabbages again, I am going to take the gun down the garden this evening, causes him to rush immediately to the study in one of the corners of which the gun is kept.

A friend of mine wrote to me only the other day describing the behaviour of her collie on the occasion when, having sold her house, she moved to another in a different part of the country. While she was looking for this house Rover, the collie, was left for a week

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with a friend who lived next door, and who later, while the sale of furniture and packing was in progress, accommodated both the dog and his mistress. During the whole of this unsettled period Rover never left his mistress for a moment, following her everywhere and looking so extremely miserable that she thought he must be ill. The day before the final departure the friend asked: 'What about Rover—are you leaving him with me?' The answer to this was an emphatic 'Oh no! Of course I am taking Rover with me.' At this the dog sprang up on to his mistress' lap, pawed her excitedly and licked her face, and then ran round and round the room, obviously showing his pleasure and intense relief from the anxiety which had depressed him.

The average dog is always distressingly lost and unhappy during the holiday period when he is separated from his people, however comfortable the foster-home or kennels to which he is sent may be. One of the first things that a dog learns in this connection is that suitcases or cabin trunks are not so harmless as they look, and that their removal from the cupboard to the bedroom where they will be filled with clothes has a most ominous significance, because it indicates the departure of master or mistress on a journey which may be made without a dog.

One of the age-old canine arguments concerning which there never seems to be any agreement is whether the dog possesses the power of reasoning or not, and a number of admirers of the canine species, who are quite willing to give the animal the fullest credit for general intelligence, maintain that the dog, in common with all other animals, is deficient in this special quality, which is an attribute of the human being alone. A long experience with a variety of dog companions causes me to think that the average intelligent dog does possess the power of reasoning to a quite marked degree.

My dictionary gives as the meaning of the verb 'reason'—'to exercise the faculty of reason; to deduce inferences from premises'. I maintain that it is obvious that a dog can reason if the mere sight of a suitcase causes it to know that a separation is impending. The measures taken to prevent this separation vary, and the usual one

is that adopted by a poodle with whom I am acquainted, who takes care that he never gives his mistress a chance to slip away while he is not looking. Many dogs keep a close watch on the cause of the trouble, the suitcase, knowing full well that master will not go away without it. An even clearer case of canine reasoning was provided by a dog I knew who, at the first sight of one of the hated articles, went into the garage and took a seat in the car. Here he



*Never gives his mistress
a chance to slip away.*

remained, flatly refusing to come out even for meals, his argument being that since master could not leave without the car the obvious thing to do was to stay in it until the journey started.

One thing which, I think, quite a number of intelligent dogs know is our calendar system so far as the week is concerned, which is proof that they can count up to seven; or conversely that they have the gift of drawing conclusions from scraps of evidence which a detective in fiction would not despise. I have encountered many proofs of this, for instance a retriever who never troubled on Sundays to go upstairs and discover what clothes Master was going to wear, as he knew there could be no possibility of shooting on the Sabbath, but on every other day of the week he came in on kit inspection with the morning tea. Another case was that of a Cairn

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bitch, who was not particularly interested in human affairs and not very companionable, but who was a confirmed car addict. She knew that the car would be used early on Monday mornings to take a small girl to school, and every Monday without fail she was curled up in the most comfortable seat in the car before breakfast.

Very naturally I should like to claim some special signs of outstanding brain in my own dog, who, in my eyes, is very exceptional, and the best I can do is to state that he knows I am deaf. When he requires help with a rabbit in a bramble patch—and the average cunning old Scottie will never work this prickly growth if he can make some human slave do it—it has been noticed that he barks much louder to call me than he does with others. In the same way, if he wishes to attract my attention, and notify me that the time for taking a dog for a walk is overdue, he does not utter those rumbling growls which are a sufficient reminder to ordinary people, but pokes me in the calf with his nose. An Irishman who is also a Scottie owner, wrote to me rather pathetically the other day: 'Why do we put up with these bossing Scottish breeds?'

But bossiness, like most other qualities, can be put to good use, and my present Scottie has found the ideal outlet for his temperament in the poultry runs. There is a belief which some people hold that the spirits of the departed return to earth in due course, and it all depends on how they behaved during their previous life whether they come back to it again in human or animal form. If there is any truth in this belief I think that my Scottie must have been a Regimental-sergeant-major of Grenadier Guards in his previous existence, and I should say that very probably he was an excellent sergeant-major from the point of view of the general discipline of the battalion, but that possibly he erred a trifle on the side of harshness. The keynote of his life to-day is a rigid routine, with every task carried out at the appointed time to the minute and strict discipline as the watchword in all things.

He controls the household on these lines to a certain extent, but his main task is helping me with the care of chickens. As all those who suffer from poultry know, there is no discipline in the hen run,

since hens refuse to observe any rule as regards time and place, so that there is ample work for a conscientious dog to do. There is almost every day the odd bird that has got out of the run into the vegetable garden, the cockerel that has flown out of his pen into that of the pullets, and the broody hen that has escaped from the hutch in which she is incarcerated to cure her of her desire to sit. These culprits he detects at a glance, since his eye for a bird is as good as that of any expert poultryman, and his actions prove that he is shocked to the core by their lack of discipline. It is these actions, which result in considerable loss of feathers, that cause me to think that during his last time on earth he was a harsh and possibly a man-handling sergeant-major.

The most important task of all is shutting up the birds at night, and when in the evening the light gives way to dusk he orders me from my chair with a shrill bark to carry out the essential job. One chilly evening some members of a pen of two-month-old birds had decided that they would stay out for a trifle longer than usual, and my efforts to round them up brought out the whole clutch to see what was happening. Despite frantic barking, and all the assistance that a dog could render from the other side of the wire, I failed to get them into the ark again, and being dead weary decided to leave them to it, hoping that no fox would jump the six-foot fencing into the run.

I had just settled into my chair again with an uneasy conscience at a task left undone when the Scottie burst into the room. He sprang up at me, knocking my newspaper from my hands, ordered me out of the house with a volley of high-pitched barks, led me straight down to the chicks' run and saw to it that I dutifully closed the door on the recalcitrant birds, which by this time had returned to the ark. It was while we were walking back to the house that it dawned on me the part the Scottie had played in his previous existence, for, as he trotted jauntily ahead of me with his tail well cocked, I saw in my mind's eye a Regimental-sergeant-major of Grenadier Guards, with his cane tucked firmly into his left armpit, marching in the direction of the guard room with an erring private that he detected in some breach of discipline walking contritely behind.

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Another wearisome task in which he takes the keenest delight is that of the collection of broody hens in the summer time, who are occupying all the nest boxes to the exclusion of genuine layers, and who are not required for maternal duties. These are placed in a slat-bottomed cage, called the Belsen, until they are cured of their desire to sit, and my Scottie, unlike his master, thinks this incarceration of would-be mothers one of the most attractive of a poultryman's duties. The other day, whilst feeding the occupants of the Belsen, which stands under the shelter in the hen run, one of the occupants slipped out under my arm and immediately joined her sisters who were gathered round the food trough, much to the horror of the attendant Scottie who was shocked to the core by this display of indiscipline.

I have been told that experienced shepherds of the old type were so efficient in their work that they could recognise every sheep in their flock of a hundred or so by their faces, but I have never yet heard of a poultryman with a pen of over twenty Rhode Island Reds who could do the same thing with his birds. One Rhode Island looks very much the same as another to me, and I therefore made no effort to catch the bird, intending to pick her up later when she returned, as inevitably she would, to the nest box, but the Scottie was not going to overlook this flagrant flouting of his authority. He dashed into the flock of birds, scattering them in all directions, singled out the errant hen, drove her down into the ditch where once again she became hopelessly mixed up with the others, and, finally cornering her in an angle of the wire run, held her there with what I could only hope was a soft mouth until I picked her up to return her to the cage. The remarkable part about the occurrence was that, though again and again the hen, who was exactly like the remainder of her sisters, had been in the midst of a whirl of feathers, wings and dust, the small dog had never lost sight of her, and the bird he eventually cornered was the errant broody and none other.

Although I give the small fellow full marks for his discerning nose and eye I am not at all sure that combined sheepdog and retriever tactics in the fowl run go hand-in-hand with satisfactory

egg production, and there is an unworthy suspicion at the back of my mind that it is not entirely his keen sense of duty that impels his actions. Chasing chickens is the most attractive sport in which a young dog emerging from puppyhood can engage, and I suspect sometimes that, so far from being shocked at lack of discipline in the poultry world, he is delighted to detect an example of it which will serve as an excuse for a really vigorous hen hunt.

Although it is obvious that the average dog considers that it is his mission in life to identify himself with all his master's activities and to see everything from that important person's point of view, he usually fails in this earnest endeavour in two respects. One concerns the garden and the time that is wasted in it, which he quite fails, or flatly refuses to understand. The second point on which a dog does not see eye to eye with, or perhaps it would be more correct to say smell nose to nose with, his mistress and to a lesser extent his master is over the question of what constitutes a pleasing scent and what is a most unpleasant effluvium; and this is a most modest way of describing the truly frightful odour that occasionally emanates from a dog's back when he has been rolling in 'something'. I have put the word 'something' in inverted commas because it is always a very special 'something'; not every rotting corpse of some specimen of wild beast or bird life provides the ideal perfume that a dog esteems. The older he gets the more particular he becomes, so that sometimes months may elapse before he finds on his daily walk a patch of fur or feather which will yield that rich and penetrating bouquet that will send every occupant of the sitting-room screaming with disgust into the open air.

These 'somethings' are very much a matter of taste, and there is no general canine rule as to what variety of corpse or offal will provide the particular scent that individual dogs esteem. My old Scottie, who passed on to the Elysian fields some years ago, always found his special bouquet in a dead mole, but just an ordinary smelly dead mole did not pass muster by any means. Like a prime Stilton or Wensleydale, it had to reach a certain stage of ripeness before it became perfect, and day after day, looking very much like a member

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of a gourmets' club's dining-room committee at a conference on a cheese, he would sniff the corpse by the wayside until at last the happy moment arrived, and his nose told him that having reached perfection it was now worthy of a highly-bred dog's attention. He performed only two rolls, a very deliberate right-handed one followed by a left, but they were quite sufficient, since it meant at least two baths and the expenditure of the best part of a cake of dog's soap before he was fit to move in human circles again.

My present fellow has not learnt to discriminate in this fashion, for he is not yet in the real connoisseur class, but he did very well for a comparative beginner recently when he rolled in what had been a fox-cub in the past. The perfume possibly would not have passed muster with his predecessor, but it was quite sufficient to cause him to be hurried to a bath, where he was washed with a strong antiseptic soap in warm water, and afterwards to be anointed with some *eau-de-Cologne* to counteract the *eau de fox cub* which was still asserting itself. He resented the bath very strongly, but still more did he resent the horrible penetrating smell that permeated his coat after he had been sprayed with the contents of the scent bottle.

I have never been able to make up my mind as to whether a dog recognises the system of reprisals or, in other words, will endeavour to get a bit of his own back when his feelings are hurt, but my Scottie, who has not yet discarded all the habits of his puppyhood, and among other things still picks up, chews and shakes any handful of weeds that I throw out from a garden bed. Shortly after he was anointed with *eau-de-Cologne*, he was found chewing and afterwards rolling on a large bulb of garlic, which, since it is anathema in the house, I grow surreptitiously in a secret corner of the garden, to be used only during those short periods when I am leading a bachelor existence.

The Scottish terrier, who served with me for many years in Sinai, was a particularly artful dog and furnished me with many instances of his reasoning powers. I do not expect everyone to believe this very improbable story, although I believe it myself, as

I knew the two animals involved intimately and understood their characters. The name of my Scottie was 'Wattie'—pure bred except for possibly one tiny indiscretion on the part of his great-grand-mother—and the other dog was a 'sort of fox-terrier', about whom his owner said: 'his mother was a pedigree bitch, and his father belonged to an archdeacon.'

Wattie was extremely clever, but Spot, handicapped by his name, poor chap, was rather an ass; and the two dogs loathed each other. As Spot's owner was a very great friend of mine Wattie realised that open warfare would not be tolerated, and therefore it was only occasionally that there were bared teeth and bristling hackles, and the rough and tumble which might have cleared the air never occurred.

One day Spot and his owner, Wattie and I and several other human beings (note the order of precedence) met at the flat of a friend who was a collector of rugs and carpets, and he showed us with pride a recent acquisition—a pair of Persian donkey saddle-bags turned into a giant hassock, and extremely beautiful they were. While we were admiring the saddle-bags Wattie and Spot walked round each other on their toes with hard looks in their eyes and muttered growls.

Then our host began to serve out drinks, and at the moment when everyone's attention was devoted to the tray of bottles and glasses I saw old Wattie make a quick appreciation of the situation, and walk very quietly over to the saddle-bags, where for a fleeting second he paused with lifted leg. Then with a meaning look at Spot he came back to my chair and sat down beneath it; as he expected, no one else had noticed his little act.

There is only one thing a dog can do when the gauntlet is flung down in this fashion, and Spot did it. Like the blundering ass he was he did not wait, as Wattie had done, until the party were otherwise occupied, but ran across the room straight to the saddle-bags. Next moment there were howls of rage, everyone, except myself, hit and kicked at Spot, and he was turned out of the room into the passage in disgrace.

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I noticed a look of gloating triumph in Wattie's eyes as his enemy with tucked-in tail was slung through the door as a dog unfit to move in civilised circles, and I have no doubt in my mind that his act had been deliberate to achieve the result he anticipated. A trifle malicious perhaps, but after all everything is permissible in a total war.

Towards the end of his long life old Wattie afforded proof that either he possessed the most remarkable scenting powers, which I had not noticed previously, or was endowed with some sixth sense which told him of things that were not apparent to the eye, and could not be detected by the nose. This occurred when the big mail boat, in which my wife and I had travelled outwards on our return from annual leave to the U.K., had just tied up at her berth opposite the Simon Artz building in Port Said harbour.

Our first thought on waking was of the little Scottie who, we knew, had been eating his heart out while we were away, and, looking through the porthole, I saw to my relief—for the East is a place of sudden canine tragedies—my Arab orderly appear at the head of the gangway with a small wildly-excited black person on a lead. The Scottie knew perfectly well that we were on board; had he not seen us depart so often on similar evil things which took his people away from him—but what sense was it that enabled him to know our cabin from a score of others? It was one of a row of upper deck rooms, situated right aft, and between it and the head of the gangway was some sixty yards of open deck, but the moment the dog reached the top of the gangway, and without pausing to take stock of the situation, he was off! Straight as a die, galloping furiously and towing the Arab orderly, his lead tripping up dock hands, deck hands and all hands, he came direct to the door of our cabin and hurled himself against it. In this case either our scent was strong enough to travel sixty yards through the rather penetrating odour of the East and that of a swarm of Port Said humanity—which I should hate to think—or some unknown instinct told the Scottie where to go.

One of the most endearing characteristics of the canine breed is their mute acceptance of the fact that, however unworthy we may

be, we are of a superior race and that we are actuated by the highest motives, and therefore I was surprised to meet recently a dog with an extremely low opinion of humanity and I am not sure whether he was born like that, or whether the conviction grew upon him as the result of many unfortunate experiences. I had called at the cottage of a local jobbing gardener to fetch a bundle of bedding-out plants which were awaiting me, and I was asked to wait in the parlour until 'himself' could be found among the rows of peas and beans. Having admired the photograph of a wedding group in the queer clothes of Edward VII's days, with excessive top-hamper in the way of flowery hats worn by the females of the party, and the incredibly high white collars propping up the chins of the men, I picked up a piece of pink coral from the occasional table to look at it closer when a low growl from the opposite corner of the room called my attention to a large black and white dog of indeterminate breed which was lying on the couch. He was watching me with a hard cold look in his eyes—much the same look as our village constable employs when one parks one's car on the 'No Parking' side of the main road in the midst of the Wednesday market crowd.

I replaced the coral hurriedly, and turned to look into the family Bible, which was displayed on a crochet mat, when there came another growl from the couch. At this moment the gardener came in with my bundle of plants and, having received instructions as to their treatment, I was about to take the parcel from him and put it under my arm when there was another interruption from the dog.

'If you'll allow me, sir, I'll hand the parcel to you at the gate,' said the gardener. 'The old dog won't let anybody leave this house with more on them than they brought in with them. If you'd carried the parcel in with you, you could go out again with it, and nothing said, but as it is, I'll have to hand it to you outside the door, or he'll fix you. Last week the fire insurance agent called here for my policy to add the renewal notice to it. My missus, forgetting all about the dog in the room, handed it to the agent, and when he opened the door to go out the old dog had half the seat of his trousers off him.'

CHAPTER 9

THE UNEXPECTED

Major Anthony Buxton, whose fishing experience is probably greater than mine, queries my views which I expressed in an article on angling that fish are incapable of feeling pain. He writes: 'How do you explain the following well-known reactions of, say, a salmon? If you walk away from a hooked fish without touching the reel, but merely holding the line tight against the rod, he will nearly always follow quietly like a dog on a leash, but if you stumble while walking backwards he will probably start struggling. The moment you use the reel he will fight unless you move in towards him quicker than you are reeling. I am convinced that the reel, and to a lesser degree a stumble, causes pain, or, at any rate, fear.'

My theory, which is more in the nature of an idle imagining than a firm conviction for which I am prepared to go to the stake, is that all creatures have a marked sense of fear, and in the case of a salmon or any fish this usually becomes manifest when it realises it is caught up in something from which it cannot free itself. When there is no strain on the cast it feels nothing, although the hook may be embedded in its mouth, but immediately the rod-wielder stumbles, as Major Buxton suggests, or the reel is employed, it becomes aware from the tightening of the line that its life is in danger, and usually struggles furiously against the pull.

Those who have spent much of their spare time with rods in their hands will recall many occasions when a salmon or a trout has put up a remarkably dull and unenterprising fight, which suggested it was neither frightened nor hurt, but was merely trying to free itself from something in which it had become entangled. They will probably also remember that the same lethargic fish, when lifted out of the water in a net, immediately came to very active life indeed when it realised that it was in danger. There is a general belief when

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a fish behaves in this fashion that the hook is embedded in some gristly part of the mouth where there are no nerves, but it has been my experience that there is no rule about this, and I have encountered perfectly conditioned salmon and trout which have shown no anxiety during the playing of them when the hook was well home in the back of the mouth, or even in the tongue itself.

A clear instance of this was provided when, while fishing for brown trout with a 4s. trout ticket and a large wet fly on an Irish river, I rose and hooked a 10 lb. salmon. The fish rose to me while I was standing in the centre of a very narrow eel-weir, which was constructed across the river, and with a light 9-foot rod and only thirty yards of line with a small amount of backing on my reel, I viewed the situation with some anxiety. Though I had struck heavily and driven the hook well home, instead of the wild screech of the reel that I expected, the fish swam off in a very leisurely manner to the far bank. When he had taken off some twenty-five yards of line, I gave him the butt cautiously, but again nothing much happened, since he turned obediently without putting any strain on the cast. This went on for some ten minutes with the salmon swimming about lazily until eventually I brought him up to the weir, and without much trouble negotiated my not-very-large net under him. Then as I lifted him out the uneventful peaceful state of affairs suddenly ended, and the fish came to life with a vengeance. He gave a violent leap which broke the net, and fell on the stones of the weir a few inches from the water.

His next jump, luckily for me, took him in the opposite direction, and he soared through the air, to land on the top of the narrow weir. A third jump brought him down to the water's edge on the other side of the structure, and here I managed to throw myself on top of him before he could wriggle his way back to the river. Then, with my bare fist, I hammered his head until I had knocked him into a state of insensibility, after which I was able to relax my grip on him a trifle while I found a stone with which to finish the job.

It was so very obvious that this salmon was not alarmed in any way when he found that he was connected to my trout-line, since

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he swam round in such a tired and listless manner that I imagined I had hooked a most emaciated kelt, or a very sick fish on the point of death. The violence of his jumps, and the energy he displayed immediately he was lifted from the water, proved that, so far from being a sick fish, he was in the pink of condition, and if he had put up the same struggle while I was playing him I doubt very much if I should have landed him.



I managed to throw myself on top of him.

During the struggle the cast was broken, and when I searched for my fly I found it firmly embedded in the root of the tongue, which according to our ideas, is the most sensitive part of a salmon's anatomy. Incidentally, although the episode ended successfully, the river keeper arrived before I could get the fish safely tucked away into my bag, and as the result I had to fork out 16s., being the difference between the 4s. ticket for trout fishing, and the £1 required for salmon fishing!

I mention all this tentatively, for it is generally accepted nowadays that no one has the faintest idea of what is passing in a salmon's mind, what it is that dictates its uncertain behaviour, or how it will react in various circumstances. I have, however, frequently experi-

enced much the same sort of thing with ordinary brown trout, but perhaps the clearest proof that a fish is regardless of pain is afforded by that game fighter of the sea, the barracouta, which in recent times has been in bad odour, since under the name of snoek, and enclosed in a tin, it is one of the things that we were supposed to eat.

One trolls for barracouta with a dead bait equipped with two triangles of fearsome-looking hooks, and it is a common, in fact a quite usual experience for this fish to snap savagely at the bait three or four times at intervals of about five seconds until either the hooks drive home, or the bait is torn off and eaten. At each tug on the line one responds with as vigorous a strike as the tackle will stand, for the barracouta has a particularly hard mouth which is nearly hook-proof, but this has no effect whatsoever on the fish, which presumably has no sense of pain, since it will continue its attacks on the bait after the hooks have been torn out of its jaws. It is not unusual to find, when it is eventually brought to the boat, that one or two of its large, ivory teeth have been broken off by the strikes that failed to drive the hooks into its mouth.

Everyone who fishes for trout in rivers or loughs, in which there is a run of salmon, will sooner or later have an experience similar to that which happened to me on the Irish river. The only remarkable thing about catching a salmon with a small trout-rod is that so often the lucky angler manages to play, and ultimately land the fish on tackle that is certainly not up to its weight. The reason for this, I imagine, is that the fisherman, realising that there will be an immediate break if he puts any hint of strain on his xx or xxx cast, is content to play the salmon for the best part of an hour until it has reached a stage of such complete exhaustion that it can be gradually manipulated to a suitable gravel shallow, where it can be landed with a certain degree of safety.

So far as I remember, the incident has happened to me on five different occasions, if I exclude the more or less common occurrence when one hooks a salmon while fishing for sea-trout, which to a certain extent is to be expected, and which is not such a nerve-racking business, because the tackle is more or less up to the

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standard required for a fish of 10 lbs. or so. I have a very vivid recollection of the first salmon that took my fly when trout fishing, since it occurred on Lough Melvin in 1919, when I was using my trout-rod for the first time after five years' abstinence over which I had no control. Paddy, the boatman, to compensate me for the long years I had missed, had rowed me up to the best drift on the lough and, having examined my tail and dropper flies with a critical eye, gave me the order to start work.

'And now let's see what you can do wid your rod after the years you wasted in Palestine,' he said, and as he spoke I made my first



cast to which there was instant response, for immediately the flies alighted on the water there was a terrific boil, and a salmon of about 15 lbs. broke the surface with a head-and-shoulder rise. I think it was a trifle unkind of luck to arrange things so that a salmon hooked itself with the very first cast I made after a long and wearisome war, because, not only had I forgotten all that I had learnt about playing a heavy fish, but my reel also afforded proof that the long period of idleness had not improved the ease of its running.

I am not very certain what I did, or did not do for about three hectic minutes, but I gathered from Paddy's frantic shouts that everything was wrong, and when eventually the salmon left me for good, after a three-foot 'lepp' into the air, to which I did not drop the point of my rod as we are strictly instructed to do on these occasions, he caught the short length of gut as it blew past him and

muttered: 'Well, begob, you made up your mind to lose that fish all right. Ye did everything you could to make certain that he broke you.' Although the Irish gillie is usually politeness personified, and apt to flatter the angler in his charge, there are occasions when his patience becomes exhausted, and then he tells the truth with considerable vigour.

The next salmon that took my trout fly was on Lough Currane at the other end of Eire, and this fish, a twelve-pounder, was in a quite reasonable frame of mind, since, after it had cruised round us for about a quarter-of-an-hour, it allowed itself to be pulled in to the side of the boat. The landing-net we had with us was too small to accommodate the fish, and my brother therefore got out a small patent gaff which he carried in his bag, but which he never used. Without examining it to see if it was in working order, he made a jab at the fish, and the gaff did nothing more than score a deep scratch along the salmon's side for the very good reason that there was no point on the implement.

Luckily, my small trout-rod responded nobly to the terrific dive the salmon made towards the bottom of the lough after this treatment, and for the next half-hour afforded proof that, whereas it had been unaware that its life was in danger while cruising about in an easy manner on the hook, it was now thoroughly frightened and determined to get away.

After its initial plunge towards the bottom, it swam vigorously in the direction of the shore, and the only thing we could do in the circumstances was to row the boat after it. Eventually, when the fish was beginning to tire, another boat appeared on the scene to ascertain what we were doing, and we called out to the occupants to ask them if they had a net big enough to hold a salmon. The boatman replied that he had, and added: 'But you won't be wanting a net if you stay there any longer. Have a look at the bottom!' I looked down into the depths through the clear water, and saw the salmon swimming about in a tumbled mass of sharp-edged rocks against which my light cast was rubbing with every move made by the fish. It was a marvel that the frayed gut had not broken at the first con-

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tact with these rocks, but this was evidently one of those occasions when the shade of Izaak Walton, or whoever it is that takes an interest in the doings of fishermen, was so directing affairs that I escaped disaster.

For the next five minutes I held the salmon firmly while my brother rowed the boat away from the rocky area, and then when we had reached safer water, I brought the fish gradually to the surface, where the huge net borrowed from the other boat was slipped under it.

While the unexpected may occur at any time to any fisherman, so also may the unusual, and I am reminded of several experiences I have had with queer fish, that had cannibal or peculiar tastes, and some of these were pike, but others were not.

The first pike that I caught almost marked an epoch in my life, since I was only nine years of age at the time and had previously never landed anything scaling more than 4 ozs. As a pike it was not exactly a record, for it weighed only 6 lbs., but it was a quite remarkable fish in one way, since the pond in which I caught it was only a matter of ten yards long by five yards wide and three feet deep, and for very obvious reasons it was the only fish in the water. The various small roach and dace that may have been residents there originally had gone the way of all flesh soon after the pike had reached the age of adolescence, and I can only conclude that this cannibal fish which, incidentally, was not in particularly good condition, had been just managing to exist on frogs, moorhen chicks, or any living thing that ventured on the tiny pond.

Another remarkable point about the capture of this pike was that there was no suggestion of that long wait, which the best of fishermen expect as a matter of course after they put their lines in the water. At the moment when I raised my rod and dropped my live-bait on the surface of the little pond a wave came surging towards it from beneath a willow bush, and in something less than a second I was into my first pike, which had hooked himself so efficiently that there was not the slightest risk of losing him.

My next meeting with a pike occurred during an early morning

duck shoot on Lough Erne, in Co. Fermanagh, which, owing to the complete lack of wind, was a failure since, although there were ducks in plenty, not one came within two hundred yards of the boat. On my way back to a late breakfast, a solitary mallard which was just within range passed overhead, and in response to the contents of the choke barrel I had the satisfaction of seeing it turn over in the air to fall with a big splash on the calm surface of the lough a hundred yards away. I had just got the boat alongside the bird, and had stretched out my hand to pick it up, when an enormous green and black-barred shape surged up from the depths and a pair of jaws set with gleaming teeth dragged the sole result of my morning's shoot away from my grasp.

With the fleeting glimpse that I obtained of this pike I had no opportunity of judging its weight with any degree of accuracy. I can only say that it looked to be at least three times the size of the 25 lb. salmon I had caught the week previously, and I felt thankful that it happened to be a dead duck in the water at that spot and not myself having an early morning bathe.

In connection with huge fish, of which one only obtains a momentary glimpse, I am reminded of another incident on an Irish lough—this time Lough Corrib—which, although it contains pike, is more famous for its giant trout. This occurred some years ago when I was staying at a lough-side cottage in one of the less frequented bays on the western side. Here, after a long day in the boat dapping the harry longlegs (it is always the 'harry' and not the 'daddy' in Ireland), I was in the habit of going out again after dinner for half an hour or so during that short period between twilight and dusk. On these occasions I fished the ordinary wet-fly instead of the dap, usually finding the trout in a mood to take. On the last evening of my stay I had drifted down to the end of a small promontory, when unfortunately for me I saw near the crest of the small wave, in which the end of my cast was working, a huge golden side as a giant trout came to the fly. I say 'unfortunately' with very good reason, because, if I had not caught a glimpse of that golden flash below the surface, I should not have noticed anything until the

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monster actually took the fly with a swirl and a splash, but as it was, being a dry-fly man with the incurable habit of responding immediately to any manifestation in the water near one's lure, I struck too soon. The cast came limply back to me and the trout, either to show his annoyance at the sudden disappearance of the fly that he was about to take, or to demonstrate to me what I had missed through my hastiness, gave another lazy roll in the water before returning to the depths from which he had come.

Angling lore, as we all know, is replete with stories of the big one that got away, and therefore I do not expect to be believed when I say that this trout, which did not get away, since he was never hooked, was, from what I saw of him, well over 15 lbs. in weight. The only consolation I obtained from the sad occasion was that, as my cast was very old and frayed, I felt that if I had hooked him I should undoubtedly have lost him sooner or later.

Recently a small syndicate of which I was a member rented a side carrier of a main river, netted it thoroughly for pike and coarse fish, erected gratings at both ends and stocked it with $\frac{1}{2}$ lb. trout. The result on the whole was satisfactory, but in the most attractive stretch of the small carrier, trout were always very few and far between despite restocking, and this was attributed to a pike which had escaped during the netting operations. From time to time one noticed from the disturbance in the water, with frightened trout jumping, that cannibalism was in progress, and this went on until, one evening, I put my fly over a most unassuming little rise in this stretch, expecting a response from a small trout.

Instead I met something very much bigger than I had anticipated, but which, despite its size, put up a particularly poor fight, and eventually I negotiated into the net the most repellent and savage-looking trout I have ever met. It was 25 ins. in length, 9 ins. of which was long, lean head, with jaws equipped with a set of teeth up to bull-terrier's standard, and when I lay him out on the grass the farmer who rents the meadows, and who is a fisherman in his spare time, came up to look at him.

'A cannibal,' I said apologetically.

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'Cannibal!' replied the farmer. 'He's more than that—he looks to me the sort of fish that would get out of the water at night and chase my sheep!'

I had always imagined that the *ferox* was a distinct variety of trout, but according to modern teaching there is only one fresh-water species of trout in this country, namely, *Salmo fario*, and the *ferox* is an ordinary brown trout which adopted bad habits when middle-aged, growing to considerable size as the result. I read in a fishing article some time ago that a possible explanation of the complete absence of pike in the excellent trout waters of Lough Melvin in the north of Ireland is due to the many big cannibal *ferox* in the lough.

It would certainly be an exception to the general rule if big cannibal trout caused any diminution in the number of pike in a lake and proof of this is afforded by most of the big loughs of Ireland, notably Corrib and Mask, some eighty miles to the south of Melvin which not only hold trout up to 20 lbs. in weight but also pike which are reputed to weigh 50 lbs. I am not certain if there is any reliable evidence of a pike being caught in Corrib which actually scaled 50 lbs., because on the various occasions when giants of approximately this size have been landed the weighing of the fish has not been carried out properly at the right time in the presence of witnesses, but there is every reason to believe that pike of this size do exist in this lough, although the fifty-pounder may not be accepted in official piscatorial circles.

I recall that once, on our return in the evening after a day spent dapping the herry longlegs for trout on Lough Corrib, we noticed an appreciable wave travelling in front of the boat as we rowed up the narrow and shallow stream that leads to the landing-place at Oughterard. Paddy, the boatman, dropped his oars while he stood up in the bows to ascertain the cause of the wave, and he then told us that it was made by a giant pike which he knew well by sight, and which in his opinion was 60 lbs. and over. I caught a glimpse of it a few minutes later when, realising that it was in danger of being cut off in the small channel, it turned and dashed past the boat to the

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open lough beyond, and, though it is impossible to obtain any idea of the weight of a fish from a momentary glimpse of it in the water, it looked to me as if Paddy was not exaggerating on this occasion.

He may possibly have been drawing the long bow slightly when he went on to tell me that some years previously a fisherman had hooked this pike while trolling for trout, and that it had towed him across the lough to Ballynalty and back again before it finally broke the trace.—‘And, begob, I was glad to see him go. I wasn’t looking forward to gaffing and hauling into the boat a cratur as big and ugly as a man-eating shark, with the jaws and teeth of the same.’

I have never come into close contact with a pike of more than 20 lbs. but judging from the elongated shape of the fish I imagine that to scale 50 lbs. a pike would have to be approximately five feet in length. I have caught several barracouta that weighed 50 lbs., which were invariably five feet or more in length, and, as all those who have met this sub-tropical fish will agree, it is the salt-water edition of the pike, which it resembles in every respect, including the dark bars on its flanks, which fade shortly before death. The only difference seems to be that the barracouta has a single ivory tooth in the middle of its top jaw to assist it to get a firm grip of its prey, which I have not noticed in the very well equipped jaws of the pike.

REPTILIAN AFFAIRS

I have had visual proof that the common lizard which frequents our gardens in summertime is, when it is put to it, as nimble at going aloft as its Eastern cousin, the gecko, which spends its entire life on the interior walls of bungalows and houses in sub-tropical climates. There is one in my garden which I know by sight, because at some time of its life it lost so much of its original tail that its natural resources could replace it only by a short and unsymmetrical stump. According to my *Encyclopædia Britannica*, when a lizard drops half its tail, which it does whenever it is faced by a difficult and alarming situation, the missing part is reproduced in a very short time, 'but, whilst the muscles and also the integuments may be perfectly regenerated, the osseous part always remains replaced by a cartilaginous rod, without vertebral segmentation'. This is exactly what happened to my food-shed lizard, and I am grateful to the *Encyclopædia* for putting it so clearly.

The other afternoon this stump-tailed lizard flushed a fat wood-louse on the steps of the shed, and chased it inside. When the wood-louse, in an effort to escape, ran up the interior wall, the lizard followed it to the height of two feet or more and picked it up as neatly as does the gecko when it meets a mosquito or a silver-fish. After this the lizard, with its jaws working as it masticated the wood-louse, turned round and came down again as easily as it had ascended. The feet of the gecko have soft pads with suctional properties which enable it to run about on a highly polished wall with the greatest ease, and the explanation of my English lizard's activity aloft was that the walls of the shed are of rough concrete, which offers suitable footholds for the tiny claws with which its feet are equipped.

The peculiarity about the gecko is that, though it is a nocturnal reptile designed by Nature to catch its food supply in the dark, as is

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seen from its transparent body, in which one can see its heart and liver working, it is all in favour of modern progress, and is more than ready to take the fullest advantage of the coveys of flying and crawling insects that are attracted by a bracket-lamp on the wall. There were many geckos in the house in which I lived in the desert, and since one has a fellow feeling for a reptile that specialises in mosquito elimination, I took an interest in their way of life.

It seems that the gecko stakes out a claim for its feeding-ground on a certain area of wall in the same way as our robins and black-birds assert their ownership to certain portions of the garden, and there were three, presumably father, mother and eldest son, or possibly husband, wife and lodger, that took up their quarters behind an amateur water-colour that was hanging from the wall by a bracket lamp. This small family were most jealous of their sporting rights, with the result that, if any gecko from another part of the room wandered on to their preserve, they would charge out from behind the picture and hit it a series of buffets in the ribs until it retreated. We obtained a certain amount of amusement during the long hot nights from looking at these attacks on trespassers, and the Scottie of those days, who like all members of his breed took an active interest in his people's peculiarities, would spend the whole of his evening watching the wall, and immediately a stray gecko came onto the preserve would call attention to the poacher by barking loudly.

Another common lizard of the East which is most unpopular in the eyes of all Mohammedans is one of the *agama* species, to which the dragon killed by St. George presumably belonged. This is a most repellent-looking spiny reptile about eighteen inches long, and when one sees it standing on a hummock in the desert it nods its head constantly in a most emphatic manner. The Arabs call it the *Hardhon*, and invariably kill it because they hold the view that the nodding of its head is a mockery of their own movements when engaged in prayer. In India, I understand, all the Mohammedan races detest it, though not on this account, but because of the legend that when the grandsons of Mohammed the Prophet, Hassan and

Hussein, were hiding from their enemies, the lizard, by nodding its head, indicated to the pursuing party the cave in which they had taken refuge. I am not certain if the Indian Mohammedans are correct in believing this, as I have an idea that there was no question of hiding in caves when these two descendants of the Prophet were killed. In Arabia it is held that Hassan was murdered by his wife at the instigation of his enemies, while Hussein with his small body-guard was ambushed on the banks of the Euphrates and killed during the battle that ensued.

Also in my garden are two sand lizards (*Lacerta agilis*) which I have reason to believe are regarded as a rare species and found only in a few localities in the British Isles, but I do not think they are quite as scarce as is supposed, since I frequently see other specimens of the variety on the high lands of the New Forest whenever the reptiles consider that the weather is suitable for sunbathing. The two in which I am particularly interested (and I assume they are a married couple though I am not sufficiently educated in the lizard family to be able to determine sex in this particular case) live in a derelict chick coop, to which a fox put the finishing touches over a year ago when it forced out a rotten plank at the back and murdered the sitting mother on her eggs. This coop was then earmarked to be broken up for firewood, but before this happened I noticed that on every sunny day there were two lizards basking on the top and that, instead of being the usual green and brown spotted colour of the species, they were a very dark sooty grey, which shade matched the colour of the aged tarred felt with which the coop was covered.

The queer colour of these small lizards affords proof that they possess, to a certain extent, the chameleon-like gift of being able to change their colour so that it blends with the surroundings in which they live, and in this connection it has often occurred to me that quite a number of the reptiles of this country can do this in a small and unassuming way. That sterling, hard-working friend of the gardener, the toad, esteemed specimens of which have their domiciles in most of the flower-beds and vegetable plots, usually acquires the

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colour of the surroundings in which he lives, so that the very fat and aged one who finds his rations on the rich black earth of the main flower-bed wears a dark purplish-brown jacket, whereas the younger and more active fellow who haunts the lower garden, where the clay seems to predominate despite heavy dressings with humus, affects a bright yellow suit.

This attempt at camouflage may possibly explain the very wide range of shades one meets in the case of the common adder, which sometimes adopts ink-black zigzag markings on a steel-blue body colour, a less conspicuous dark-coloured pattern on a back of dull green, and occasionally, usually in a spot where there is an accumulation of russet-coloured dead bracken and last year's leaves, a ginger specimen whose colouring ranges from pale dull reds to rich browns without a trace of black or blue in its make-up. It is difficult, however, to try to arrive at any conclusions about the reason for the variations in colour of the adder since this reptile is so very careless in its choice of basking sites and, though it may have adopted certain shades to match its normal surroundings, is almost invariably found asleep by the human being in some spot where, owing to the background, it is most conspicuous. Also there are some students of the species who hold the view that sex determines the general colour system, and that red adders are invariably females.

The same variations in colour are apparent in another welcome resident of my garden, the slow-worm, which, now that the townsman walks about the countryside in far greater numbers than he did in the past, would seem to be very much scarcer than it was in other days. The reason for this is presumably because the unfortunate slow-worm has no sense of danger whatsoever and, should it be bright and sunny on Easter or Whit-Monday when everyone is abroad, it takes up its position right in the centre of a well-worn path where inevitably it meets its fate, being mistaken for an adder by the first passer-by. In this connection I am not quite certain if it is fair to blame the townsman entirely since I have met quite a number of countrymen who are supremely ignorant about the three indigenous snakes, and the one legless lizard of Great Britain.

In the far-off days when I lived in a damp corner of south Dorset the gardener, a Dorset man born and bred, who hailed from the famous Ralph Wightman's neighbourhood, despite my protests was constantly bringing in 'deadly poisonous adders' that he had killed on the lawn or in the vegetable plots, which with their conspicuous and quite unmistakable bright yellow collars were so very obviously harmless grass-snakes.

I am told that there is a variety of spider in this country which, like the chameleon, can change its colour rapidly to match the leaf or branch on which it is placed, but so far I have not met the type. The two spiders with which I am best acquainted are those that live in the poultry-food shed, and one of them, a big, tough-looking brown fellow who makes a series of intricate web tunnels on the apple shelves, is apparently so sure of himself and his ability to hold his own that he would not trouble to change colour for anyone. The other, an enormous fat fellow who wears a striped waistcoat across his distended stomach, makes a huge web one foot or more in diameter, usually in a spot where I run foul of it on coming through the doorway. Unlike his very confident neighbour, he is apparently a bundle of nerves, and every time one comes near him he drops like a stone from his position in the centre of the web so that one fears he will crash on the concrete floor and burst on impact. Then one notices that he has taken the precaution to let himself down on a long length of his spider-made nylon, which he 'belays' in true nautical fashion, to bring himself up with a round turn when he is about one inch from the floor. When he recovers from his fright he climbs up to his web with a sailor-like hand-over-hand action, and it is satisfactory to note in these days when nylon is so rare and so greatly prized that the long line is not wasted, since he reels it into his mouth as he makes his ascent and presumably keeps it in reserve until it is required again.

This topic of change of colour on the part of reptiles and insects to suit local conditions reminds me of the chameleons, which were plentiful in the desert garden I had in Sinai. Quite a number of these were residents there when I fenced the area and started to cultivate

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the soil, but I was constantly adding to their numbers because, whenever in the course of my wanderings I found a chameleon eking out its existence on a bit of dry desert scrub, I took him back with me to the garden of plenty. In one corner of the enclosure there was a huge indigenous bush which bore small yellow juicy flowers for the greater part of the year, and these flowers attracted flies and insects of every variety. The chameleons on arrival from the desert were placed on this growth, where there was no limit whatsoever to the meat ration, and in a very short time they greatly increased their waist measurements becoming so *choosy* about their food that they would frequently refuse to take a most attractive fat fly when it was offered on those occasions when a visitor wished to see the reptile use its long tongue.

I learned quite a lot about the chameleon during those years when I was in constant contact with them, and one point I discovered was that their ability to change colour is not quite so extensive as we are led to believe. That is to say, if a chameleon has spent most of its life on a dull brown scrub bush growing on yellow sandy soil, it has a range of colours from reddish black through various shades of browns and yellows to dirty white, whereas another living on an orange tree or tomato plant, the deep green of which it matches admirably, can if put to the test change from a deep purple through every shade of green and orange to the palest yellow. The sombre desert scrub fellow can manage the brilliant greens of a cultivated garden in course of time, but it takes him a month or more to achieve these high spots in colouring, and in the same way the decorative chameleon from the cultivation takes much the same time to arrive at the dull tints prevailing in desert surroundings.

The chameleon brings about these changes of colour in a matter of seconds when transferred from one background to another, and it always seemed to me that his interior pigmentary mechanism carried out the job without his knowledge, because, judging by the furious expression on his face while being moved, he is not in the mood to provide a demonstration to oblige anybody; and I think

a chameleon can show his feelings more effectually than any other living thing, the wild cat not excluded. When touched by an interfering human being whilst clinging contentedly to his branch he first of all braces himself up on his feet and coils his long tail tightly; then he blows himself up until his stomach and the rest of his body reach bursting point, and at the same time his throat swells to an enormous size, altering the contours of his face, while his eyes—which work independently—come slowly into alignment to fix the intruder with a malevolent glare. It all means nothing, however, since the chameleon has no method of attack, and relies solely upon this complete change of appearance to scare off intruders. One of the stock stories about the chameleon is that which relates how one of the reptiles when placed on a Highland kilt died of a broken heart, and to test the truth of this I took one of my semi-tame chameleons and put it on a strip of Buchanan tartan, which I believe is one of the gaudiest that Scotland produces. I am sorry to disappoint my readers, particularly those from north of the Tweed, but the experiment was a complete failure since the chameleon regarded the tartan as a joke in the poorest possible taste, and did nothing whatsoever about it.

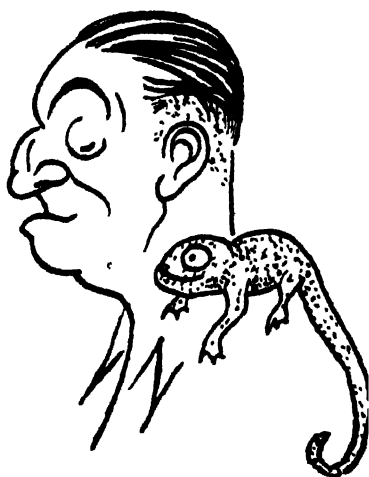
I remember these small reptiles playing an important part in Palestine during the 1914-18 War. There is no suggestion, of course, that they helped to win the war for the Allies, but nevertheless they served, and served well, in providing amusement for and keeping up the spirit of the troops. In 1917, when Allenby's army lay in front of Gaza for five weary, sun-scorched months, there was little or nothing for the men to do when they were out of the line, and even punting a football about lost its charm in the damp heat of the Philistine plains. Owing to the fact that there were no towns or villages behind the lines, the soldier could not acquire his usual pets—mongrel puppies or half-starved kittens to be fattened and made much of—and he felt lost and disgruntled until some great mind discovered possibilities in the chameleon, which was indigenous to this desert and which could be found in the branches of the small scrub bushes.

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Chameleons, like human beings, vary in character and ability. If there were energetic reptiles able to drive a long tongue with remarkable accuracy, there were also unenterprising and astigmatic members of the species who had no 'eye' for a fly at all, and who could be relied upon to miss the easiest shots. As in those days one took a certain amount of military standing from the achievements of one's pet, there was considerable competition to own a ready feeder and marksman.

All chameleons, however, look very much alike, and it was soon found necessary to have distinguishing marks to prevent Lance-Corporal Wright from acquiring Private Smith's star turn during the night and leaving him his own 'rabbit'. Every chameleon, therefore, bore on his right flank in indelible ink his name, such as 'Long-Shot Bill', 'Old Joe', or 'Sharp-Shooter', while on the left flank was inscribed the name and number of his proud owner. At meal times, when the flies of Palestine gathered in their swarming millions, the chameleons braced themselves for the work in hand, taking a firmer grip of their owner's braces with their prehensile tails and driving their claws into the wool of the Army grey-back shirt. The soldier would be seen eating from the tin plate lodged on his knee, while a jewel-eyed chameleon, leaning forward from his shoulder, took shots from all angles at the flies who settled on each forkful.

The chameleon craze spread until it obtained official recognition, and inter-company fly-catching competitions were held, at which the judges—field officers in boots and spurs—would award marks for the longest shots and the greatest number of flies taken in a given time. The regimental 'bookies' were, of course, much in evidence on these occasions, and one would hear the odds shouted 'Three to one, bar one. Three to



one bar Sergeant Green's Kaiser Bill. I lay three to one the field.'

Then came the fall of Gaza, the forced march northwards to Jerusalem, and the chameleon army was disbanded. Reluctantly the advancing troops loosed the twine from the waists of their old companions, and tenderly replaced them on the scrub bushes from which they had come originally. Unfortunately chameleons shed their skins every year; but for this it might be possible to find to-day on the plains of Gaza some bleary-eyed old veteran with faint indelible pencil marks on his flank denoting the fact that he had played his part in the 1914-18 war.

Another creature that provided a certain amount of amusement on those dog days, when there was nothing whatsoever to do but watch an inexorable sun climb slowly up a brassy sky to its zenith and descend still more slowly to the horizon in the west, was the scarab beetle.

All those who served in the Middle East, either in the last war or the one that preceded it, must have made the acquaintance of the scarab or sacred beetle of the desert, who lays her egg in a suitable piece of horse or camel dung and seems to spend the rest of her life rolling it along vigorously in search of some nice quiet spot in which to bury it. I imagine that camel dung is more suitable for the purpose than that of the horse, since it starts off by being just the right shape and size for a lengthy trundling journey across the desert, and during its progress not only becomes as symmetrical as a golf ball, but also acquires a solid coating of soil or sand, so that it is in an admirable state to withstand whatever the weather may have in store for it, and provide snug quarters and a well-stocked larder for the embryo scarab when it emerges.

The correct Latin name for this beetle is *Ateuchus sacer*, but during the 1914-18 war the cavalry and camel corps called it the 'linesman's friend', because it helped the linesman on duty in the horse or camel lines with some of his sanitary work. A group of intensely bored cavalymen or cameliers, having located a scarab beetle hurrying along with its chosen ball of manure, would put

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every conceivable obstacle in its way and then watch the insect's efforts to circumvent them. A deep trench would be scored by a penknife blade across the line of march, and into this the ball would fall; a cigarette tin would be inserted in the sand, and here the beetle would hole out in one; or a small board would be erected across the projected route, barring further progress in that direction. Whenever this happened the scarab beetle would bustle round to see what had caused the trouble and, having appreciated the situation, as the military have it, would proceed to circumvent the difficulty in a markedly efficient manner. Although this might go on for an hour or more the beetle always won in the end, since it never lost either its head or its temper, and finally, leaving the defeated soldiery on the scene, it rolled away its chosen ball of manure into the distant haze.

I was reminded of this indefatigable insect the other day when, resting on the heather in the sunshine, I saw one of our English dor beetles doing precisely the same thing with a rabbit dropping. The only difference was that the method of propulsion or traction was not quite the same, since the scarab beetle, having got into her reverse gear, which is quite as efficient as her forward top gear, cocks her two hind legs into the air and pushes the ball of manure along in front of, or I suppose it would be more correct to say, behind her, while the English dor beetle, though she also gets into reverse, holds the ball in her mandibles and drags it after her. Having watched the dor at work for some time I came to the conclusion that without doubt the Egyptian method is the more efficient of the two. There are two reasons for this: one is that with the scarab system, if there is a hole on the line of route, the ball falls into it first, and thus warns the propeller in time to avoid falling into it herself; and, secondly, a round object is so very much easier to trundle along the ground than to drag after one.

These and a myriad other memories from the past make me wonder if we did not derive more pleasure from the simple amusements of nature in the days that are gone, than the present generation does from the mechanical wonders provided by modern science; and I

feel truly sorry for small boys brought up in an age of 'rodent operatives' and scientific methods, when I recall one of the main excitements and joys of my own far-off boyhood. This was provided by the annual visit of the village rat-catcher, whose whiskered, wizened face closely resembled that of an old buck rat, and who arrived for the day's work with a box containing several polecat ferrets, a bundle of wire traps and other gear, and two 'varminty' terriers of no known breed. The old man started work by the garden sheds, passed on later to the stables and outbuildings, and finished a very full day in the hedges and ditches in the vicinity of the rick-yard. Everything seemed to go like clockwork; the ferrets went down the rat-holes at a determined bloodthirsty trot with their noses twitching, in due course the terrified rats shot out of one or other of the exits that had been left open for them, and if the attendant terriers ever missed one of these fleeing rodents I can only say that I do not recall the occasion.

I do not know what fee the old rat-catcher was paid in return for his day's work, but imagine that it was probably in the neighbourhood of half a crown. There was, however, a side-line to the profession, since in those days live rats had a definite market value, for there were always dog owners in the vicinity who were willing to buy them for the education of their young terriers. To supply this demand the old man had a most novel method of catching rats alive and unhurt, which consisted of some half a dozen golden syrup tins from which the bottoms had been cut, and to which women's discarded stockings had been firmly tied. (In those primitive days the famous nylons had not been invented, and the stockings that women wore in the daytime were of some closely-woven material, such as cashmere, that did not start a new ladder every twenty-four hours.) When the old rat-catcher came across a series of holes in a more or less open spot where his stocking traps could be employed effectually, he informed his terriers that their services would not be required and jammed into each of the holes one of his tins with the attached stocking draped gracefully below it. He then removed one of the tins temporarily to insert the ferret, and in less than a minute things

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began to happen. One after another the limp dangling stockings would spring to active life, and proceed to perform a series of high kicks with the first movements of the now famous jig, until eventually the foot of the garment was filled to bursting point with a very active rat, which could not withdraw from its confined position because every hair of its body had penetrated the texture of the



The old stocking rat-trap.

closely-woven material. When the ferret had driven out all the occupants of the bury, the tins were extracted one by one from the holes and placed against the open door of a wire rat cage while the old man gently urged the imprisoned rat backwards down the stocking to the aperture.

At that time, when there was no outcry against cruel sports, I was a regular attendant at all the best and most select ratting meets in my part of the world, but I never came across another professional rat-catcher who employed the women's discarded stocking trap, which

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I think even the Universities Federation for Animal Welfare would pass as being humane. It was remarkably efficient also, and on the only occasion on which I saw it fail the disaster was due entirely to lack of darning, which was evident when a particularly active and muscular rat, after running down the length of a very well-worn stocking, burst out through a hole in the toe and disappeared in the undergrowth.

CHAPTER II

AMONG TREES AND ORCHARDS

There are frequently arguments in the Press as to whether there is any truth in the old belief that the yew trees, which one sees in so many churchyards, were planted there by order of one of the Plantagenet kings to supply wood for long bows. It is said by those with an intimate knowledge of archery that this is probably incorrect, since the wood from an English yew does not make a first-class bow, and that large quantities of yew were imported from the Continent annually for this purpose. This seems to constitute an early instance of government bulk-buying of a foreign product which the growers of this land were producing in a big way for the nation's needs. Seeing that the yew is one of the slowest-growing of our indigenous trees the Army Ordnance of those days must have been looking a long way ahead, and the probability is that, when the churchyard yews were in a fit state to produce suitable lengths, the bow was out of date and had been replaced by the arquebus.

This constant recurring interest in yews persuaded me to re-visit a plantation of them on the downs south of Salisbury into which I had wandered while on Army manœuvres in those far-off days when, although there were no longer any battalions of bowmen in the service, there were units almost as out of date, to wit, the mounted infantry in which I was serving at the time. I had an idea at the back of my mind that many of the trees that I had seen in the big plantation, which covers well over fifty acres on the top of the down, were considerably larger than any that I had noticed in various old churchyards. After driving the car for a mile along an ancient British track that apparently had had no surface repairs since the days of the Romans, I reached the copse, which is marked on the ordnance map as Great Yews, to learn that my memory for once had not exaggerated, and that the trees in the middle of the plantation were of very great size. At four feet from the ground the



Planted by order of one of the Plantagenet kings.

circumferences of three that I selected proved to be twenty-one feet, eighteen feet and seventeen feet, and it is possible that there were several larger ones that I overlooked.

The yews on the outskirts of the copse are apparently self-sown trees which have sprung up later, but the giants in the middle appear to have been planted in some order to form what seem to be short avenues, and the question is: who planted them, and was there any particular reason for it? There is a local tradition that the ancient British planted a yew tree, or a line of them, whenever they won a battle against a neighbouring tribe, but before one could accept this

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explanation one would have to be sure that a yew can live for two thousand years. There is no space in Great Britain which was so densely populated in pre-Roman days as this stretch of downland where Hampshire, Wiltshire and Dorset meet, and where the crest of almost every hill shows visible signs of having been a built-up area in the distant past, but this happily is not so to-day, since, except for a few old farm-houses and barns here and there on the highly-cultivated undulating land, there is not a building in sight.

The most confirmed tree-planters of to-day are those who return home after spending a considerable proportion of their lives in a desert. Almost invariably they suffer from what might be called a tree complex, which is a conviction amounting to an obsession that one cannot have too many trees in the vicinity of one's dwelling-place. Immediately the denizen of the desert returns to his own country on retirement, and acquires the house and garden in which he intends to spend the rest of his life, this deep-seated urge to fill in all the open spaces with young trees and provide shade from an inexorable sun manifests itself, and it is not until some ten years later, when the trees have made some appreciable growth, that it is brought home to him that the last thing to be desired in this country is anything which shuts out the quite inadequate sun.

One of the people who has not suffered from a fuel shortage during the last few years is a friend of mine who bought a house prior to the war, which had been built way back in the 'nineties by a retired official who had spent the greater part of his life in the northern, or desert, part of the Sudan. It stands in a sheltered valley on a Dorset heath and is conspicuous (or rather its purlieus are conspicuous, since the house cannot be seen from any point of view) because it is surrounded by three acres of the densest woodland in the British Isles. For the last nine years my friend, with the help of a gardener with a wood-cutting complex, has been doing little else but hack a few openings through the jungle of giant macrocarpa, Corsican pine, cypress and other funereal growths to allow a few rays of sunlight to reach the house and the unhealthy looking lawn in front of it.

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When I came back from the desert some years ago I was no exception to the general rule and, having made the same mistake, have been busy during the last three winters cutting down the unnecessary trees that I planted so assiduously when first I returned to this country. I have learned during the process that, though it is a comparatively simple matter to plant a tree, the complete elimination of it after it has established itself during a long period is not so easy. The birch, for instance, seems rather to enjoy being cut off at the level of the soil, since that gives it an excuse to send up from round the stump something more than the contents of a birch broom, every shoot of which starts life with the firm intention of becoming a lusty young tree.

The tree that has really had its revenge on me for committing, what I thought was, 'arboricide', but which has proved to be nothing of the sort, is a plum that was well established in its position when I bought the land and laid out the garden. In my ignorance of the results of only a modicum of shade on growths under glass I built the greenhouse fairly close to this plum, whereupon the tree almost immediately shot up another ten feet or more, and pushed out its branches in every direction. One of the reasons for this sudden growth was that trespassing roots had found their way into the greenhouse, and were feeding on the rich compost beds they found there. Since this corner of England is notoriously unsuitable for plums, and as the tree in question never produced more than enough fruit for one 2 lb. pot of jam in a bumper year, I cut it down last spring in the interests of the occupants of the greenhouse. Seeing that we live in the age of reprisals I suppose I ought not to have been surprised to learn that the system of getting a bit of one's own back has spread to the tree world, and to repay me for my action the plum has now sent out dense clumps of suckers made of the toughest tool-resisting wood over an area of sixty square yards which seriously interferes with cultivation. Moreover, the spirit of the departed tree evidently holds the greenhouse responsible for the original outrage, and its penetration patrols are now working to the surface all over the floor of the structure, while the innumerable

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shoots coming up through the tomato beds seem to benefit more from the heat and rich soil than do the tomatoes themselves. It would seem that one learns only by experience in this world, and in future I shall not interfere lightly with the well-being of a plum tree.

When one wanders through an old orchard that dates back to the days of our grandparents, one will probably see a tree with its main trunk lying parallel to or actually on the ground, with one or two branches growing out of it in a vertical position. This, one will think, is the result of the lack of attention and neglect of arboriculture which was a feature of the orchards of those days, but my experiences with an apple tree during the last twelve years causes me to wonder if the grower is always to blame, and to suspect that sometimes a tree comes into being with the fixed intention of leading a crooked life.

During the autumn when the 'phoney' war had just started and we all felt that we ought to be doing something useful in the way of increased production, but were not so certain what form it should take, I fenced in a small area to accommodate a dozen new apple trees. Among them were two Beauty of Bath, and a peculiarity of this variety in the soil of my garden is that the quality of the apples is by no means the same; some bear far better flavoured fruits than others. One of these trees grew properly in an upright manner, but the other from its earliest days showed such a marked tendency to bow its head to the east, where Mecca lies, that I suspected it of having a leaning towards the Muslim faith. To counteract this I did the usual thing, and drove in a stout stake to which the stem of the tree was bound with the usual sacking protection beneath the wire; but when winter came again with a general softening up of the soil I discovered that both the tree and the stake were showing a marked inclination towards the east and Libya, where at that time Wavell was busily engaged in mopping up the last of the Italian army.

I then cut a very stout fork from a willow tree, and the gardener and I forced it into position on the eastern side, propping up both the apple tree and its stake into the vertical position again. This

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arrangement was satisfactory until the happenings at Alamein caused another eastern tendency with the result that, though the willow had taken root, it was pushed deeply into the soil, and once again the Beauty of Bath was back at an angle of forty-five degrees. By this time I was becoming very tired of its persistence and might possibly have rooted it out, but the tree had grown and produced satisfactorily despite its unruliness in other matters, and the fruits were of very excellent flavour. The gardener and I therefore made a final and determined effort to straighten things up, and on the western side we drove in two huge oak pegs to which we attached strands of stout wire. Then, enlisting some outside help, we managed to heave the tree back into its proper position, and the wires were tightly braced up.

It was about the time when success was crowning our military efforts in Germany that once again it was brought home to me that I had failed to win the battle with my apple tree. Not only were the oak pegs pulled half-way out of the ground, but the strain on the wires was such that they had cut right through the several folds of protective sacking and were deeply embedded in the bark. There seemed to be only one thing to do in the circumstances, and this was to make an unconditional surrender, which coincided with that of the German army to Montgomery. The stake, the fork, the pegs and the wires were removed, and after five years of incessant struggle the Beauty of Bath sank into a recumbent position with a soft sigh of relief. It is now exactly like those neglected trees that one sometimes sees in old orchards, since its six feet of main trunk almost touches the ground, and from it there are growing two stout, healthy stems with many side branches that bear fruit. I am very fully aware that no man who presumes to write on gardening should have such a growth on his land, and my excuse is that I did my best, but the tree had evidently a stronger character than myself. There is the point also that there is only one reason for growing an apple tree, and the distorted Beauty of Bath makes up for its disgraceful appearance by producing more and better-flavoured apples than any of the early varieties in my garden. It has also been selected by

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a pair of goldfinches as a very suitable foundation for their nest, and anything that comes up to a goldfinch's standard must have its good points.

A conclusion at which I am arriving, and which presumably is not by any means original, is that every grower of apples, plums and cherries should also be a bee-keeper on a small scale if he wishes to produce satisfactory crops of fruit. We cannot all be successful hive manipulators, of course, since a bee-keeper is born and not made, but even if, owing to our gross mismanagement of the hive and its occupants, we obtained combs in the autumn filled with honey and grubs alternately, and one queen after another went off in disgust with the majority of the hive's best workers in search of someone who could organise things a bit better, we should still obtain the invaluable services of some bees at a time when they are most essential. In my small orchard and garden when in the early spring the plums are in full bloom, the cherries are a riot of pink and white, shy quinces are producing luscious-looking flowers, and some of the early apples are on the point of bursting into a really stupendous blaze of blossom, there is hardly a bee on the place and no essential work in fertilising the flowers is being performed.

A neighbour of mine who lives a short half-mile away, and who is a most knowledgeable bee-keeper, has a matter of fifty hives crowded into a smallholding of less than an acre, but half a mile is just too far away for bees in the spring. It is not until the weather becomes more certain and the nights less cold that the honey-seekers invade my garden in their thousands. Out of the kindness of my heart I have called his attention to the congested state of the hives on his land, which hamper his garden work, and have generously offered him accommodation for half a dozen of them in a corner of my orchard, but I am afraid he has seen through my altruistic offer and is unwilling to put himself to a lot of additional work in order that his bees should fertilise my fruit trees for nothing.

It is nearly always my experience that I meet a swarm of bees when they are in full flight with no intention of stopping, or that,

if I do happen to see them when a halt has been called, the cluster is forming on a high branch of a tree where one can do little about it. Recently, while we were walking across an open stretch of gorse-grown moorland on a late summer afternoon, the Scottie, who was trotting along behind, suddenly came up to me with a worried expression on his face, which clearly indicated that something was happening that he could not understand, and that he thought it advisable to turn back. I had been walking with my eyes fixed on the path, which is a necessary precaution on this moor during sunny days, when adders are lying in the open, and on looking up I realised that we were in the middle of a swarm of bees. As is usual on these occasions, the insects were so intent on following the queen, who was leading the flight, that they ignored all obstructions, and several hit me on the face and hands, so that I agreed with the Scottie, to whom the same thing was happening, that a slight strategic withdrawal was advisable. I then noticed that the bees were flying very low, for the simple reason that they were beginning to get into mass formation on a branch of a small gorse bush by the side of the path, and while I watched the cluster of them rapidly increased in size. In a few minutes it was as large as a rugby football, and as it was a sultry afternoon it struck me that the first arrival in the heart of the gathering must be finding the position rather uncomfortable and breathing somewhat difficult.

On my return to the house my gardener, who is a bee-man in a small way, showed considerable interest in the news, and said that he would take the swarm that evening if they were still in position. He was rather doubtful about this, since apparently it is the custom of swarming bees to call a halt after they have travelled some distance from the old hive, while scouts with an eye for housing accommodation go out in every direction to look for new quarters. Immediately one of these experts returns with a report about a desirable residence the swarm moves off to occupy it before the overflow from another hive finds it. Although there is much in the bee's way of life which we humans might adopt with benefit, the system by which it is the queen who has to evacuate her old home to make

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way for one of her daughters would not be popular with us in these days, when suitable accommodation is so difficult to find.

At 7 p.m. the swarm, which was now the size and shape of an iron bucket, was hanging in a most convenient position for taking, since it was only three feet from the ground with a clear space immediately beneath it. On this the gardener spread an old Army blanket, and on the blanket he placed an open box, into which the solid mass of insects fell when with a small hand-saw he cut off the branch to which they were clinging. He next turned the box upside down on to the blanket, propping it up slightly on a half-brick, and in a matter of five minutes the few bees that had fallen outside had walked in to join the others. Then he picked up the four corners of the blanket, tied them with a piece of string round the box, and Operation Bee-Swarm was over, except for the last stage, the manipulation of the bees into the hive which, with a few empty combs inside, was waiting for them in the orchard.

This presented not the slightest difficulty, and afforded proof of the efficiency of mass instinct where bees are concerned. The swarm was tipped out of the box on to the blanket immediately in front of the hive, and a small length of board was put into position to provide a ladder to the entrance. After a few minutes' hesitation two or three scouts walked up to the small opening, from which they presumably sent a radar message that everything was perfect inside, and immediately the whole swarm marched steadily in column of fours into their new quarters to constitute a hive of bees, the market value of which to-day is £5.

There was a time when I looked upon apple picking as one of the most delightful occupations in which the human being could engage, but this was very many years ago, and dates back to the days when I was thirteen or fourteen, an age when one's appetite for apples is quite insatiable. If an apple a day keeps the doctor away, as we are told, I must have eaten sufficient of the fruit during those years to keep the doctor away from the threshold of the house for the rest of my three-score and ten. My attitude towards apples to-day is that I feel thoroughly disgruntled and ill-used if my Beauty of Bath in

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August and my Cox's Orange Pippins in September fail to yield a crop, but when the shelves of the apple shed are laden with fruits I never seem to take the trouble to eat one.

My apple-picking activities in my youth took place on my grandmother's holding in Sussex where as a schoolboy I spent a part of my summer holidays every year. Here there was a large orchard of some fifty trees, the great majority of which were of old-fashioned varieties such as one never sees to-day. Among them were ten large and wide-spreading trees which never failed to bear a heavy crop of small but very well-shaped rosy-red apples, and these were known locally as the Forge, which in those far-off days were to be seen in most orchards in Sussex, but which now appear to be quite extinct. At any rate I never meet a Sussex man to-day who has ever heard of them. The Forge was a quite excellent eating apple, though perhaps it did not come up to the standard of some of our dessert pippins to-day, but since it lacked keeping qualities the greater part of the crop picked in September, together with the big stacks of windfalls which were piled up round the tree trunks, figured in the cider which was made every year.

Sussex is not one of the counties which has achieved fame for its cider, but in every district in those days there was a professional cider-maker who in the autumn went the round of the various holdings with the press and other machinery necessary for the work, and one summer holiday when a convenient attack of chicken-pox prevented my return to school for some weeks I was present at the annual function. The cider-maker and his men arrived at about 6.30 a.m., which in those days was the hour at which farm work always started, and until about 6 p.m., it was a case of all hands to the task of carrying up the apples to the barn in which the press was installed, and dumping the pulp after the juice had been extracted.

On most of the Sussex farms in those days two grades of cider were made from the crop, that from the pure juice, and an inferior quality obtained by adding some water to the crushed pulp after the first operation, and pressing it a second time. This water cider was that which was carried down to the fields in buckets for the workers

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at harvest time, but the pure juice brew, the alcoholic content of which was very much higher, was for home consumption. My grandmother's cider, which incidentally she never drank herself in any circumstances, was extremely potent, since the pure juice with not one drop of water added was put into old brandy casks, subjected to secret treatments during fermentation, which I believe included the addition of some crushed hemp seed and hops, and kept for at least two years before the casks were tapped. The result was something quite unlike the cider which one finds in public houses in Devon and Herefordshire, or that which is sold by the various firms that specialise in bottled cider. It was not effervescent in any way, and when poured into a tumbler it looked very much like a medium sherry so far as its colour was concerned. As a matter of fact I am not at all sure that it should ever have been poured into a tumbler, since an ordinary wineglassful of this cider was quite sufficient to cause one to realise that one had drunk something well worth while, and a second glass enabled one to look on the bright side of everything.

This very over-proof cider caused a number of amusing incidents, because sometimes teetotallers would come to stay at the house, and, having regarded cider all their lives as something in the nature of a temperance beverage, would drink the best part of a pint at dinner with the most startling results, and a teetotaller more than half-seas-over for the first time in his life can put over a far more amusing turn than most of those that we hear on the B.B.C. programmes these times. The extraordinary part about it all was that though my stern old grandmother, like most women who belonged to the mid-Victorian period, had a horror of intemperance in any form, looking upon public houses as sinks of iniquity which no decent man should enter, she was not in any way shocked when one of her guests became inebriated on her cider. This was a totally different matter and, being an unsolicited testimonial to her skill as a cider-maker, she regarded it as something in the nature of a compliment.

The crowning achievement of this cider occurred when the village policeman called one day to enquire about an oversight to

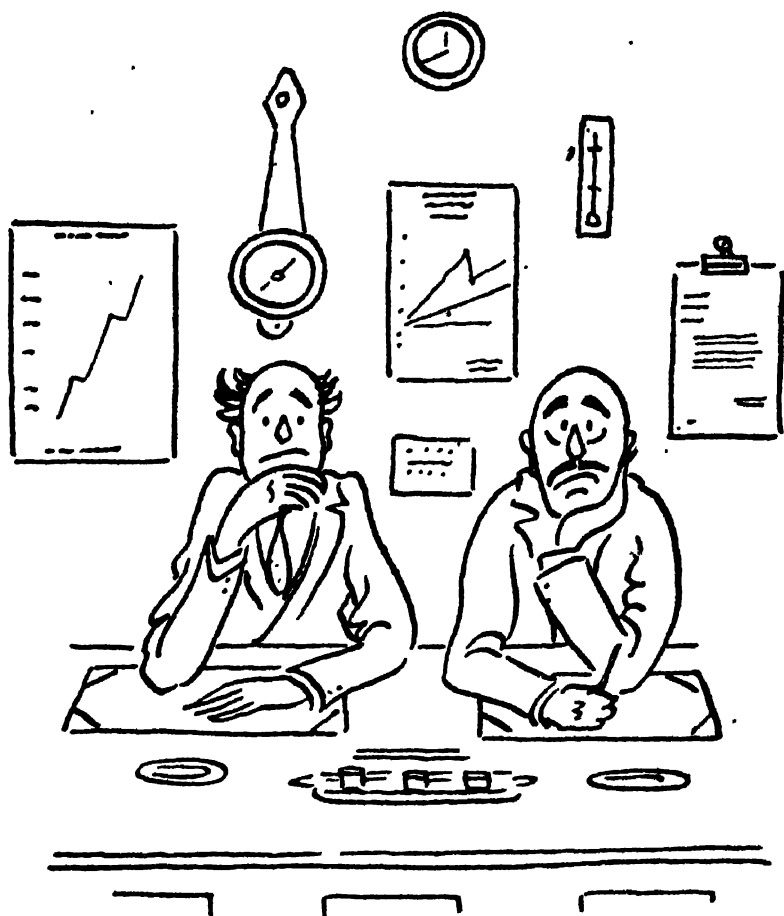
AMONG TREES AND ORCHARDS

renew the dog licences, and to refresh him after his long walk from the police station on a particularly hot day he was given a large jug of the beverage. In common with everyone else he regarded cider as an almost non-alcoholic drink which could be consumed in considerable quantities without any ill effects, but the results in this case were disastrous. Later on in the evening he was found sleeping peacefully in a dry ditch beside a stile over which he had failed to climb, and the news that their policeman had fallen from grace having reached the village, most of the inhabitants went out to see the sight.

. FICKLE SPRING

It occurs to me when I read the lines from the Song of Solomon which run: 'For lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone: the flowers appear on the earth and the time of the singing of birds is at hand' that in Palestine the seasons of the year are far more clearly marked and definite than they are in this country. It would take a very brave or rash man to start off his topical article for an English newspaper with the words 'the winter is past' on the strength of being led astray by three warm and sunny days at the end of March, but if he were in Palestine he would be fairly safe if he wrote in this optimistic strain. There, after a winter that can be extremely cold and cheerless (and I have driven through three-foot snowdrifts on the road between Hebron and Bethlehem), spring comes quite suddenly, and in a matter of days, almost of hours, the rocky barren hillsides are a blaze of colour with the rose of Sharon (the scarlet ranunculus), blue anemones, narcissi and scilla, with, later in the season, in favoured spots, the black iris and the wild hollyhock.

It is also the 'time of the singing of birds', but I think if Solomon had ever heard the spring chorus of songsters in an English orchard he would not have emphasised this point. One cannot have everything in this world, and if Palestine is better off than this country over the arrival of spring, and riot of colour in semi-desert areas that follows it, the bird song of this season cannot be compared with that which we hear every day in April and May in 'England's smiling land'. At that time of the year Palestine and Syria are alive with northern migrants of almost every species making their way back to Europe, and among them are many that are recognised as songsters in this country, such as the willow warbler, the wood warbler, the robin, the blackcap, and the nightingale, but all these birds are



Writing a topical article on the weather for an English newspaper.

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absolutely mute while they are on their long journey to their breeding haunts in the north.

The birds which inspired the sentence in the Song of Solomon were presumably the bulbul, which is sometimes called the Eastern nightingale, and the rufous warbler, both of which are local migrants and which sing very tunelessly when spring is well advanced. The goldfinch, which is resident in Palestine, also sings, though in that much-Promised Land he does not hold forth from the topmost branch of a tree for all the hours of daylight, as he does in this country. Possibly the poor fellow finds very little about which to sing.

In England, the month of February is one during which one must exercise some restraint where work in the garden is concerned. I admit that in common with all the other months in the calendar no two Februaries are ever the same as regards weather, but almost invariably at some time or other towards the end of the twenty-eight days there is that short spell of warm sunny weather which reminds one that spring is at hand, and urges one to be up and doing something for which the time is not yet ripe. One is encouraged to perform risky acts because the thrush in the topmost branches of the oak tree overhead is proclaiming to the world that he has the greatest confidence in the future weather, and that he has given his wife instructions to get busy with the building materials. One is apt to forget that this cheerful fellow with the spotted breast is an incurable optimist, so that a couple of unseasonably warm days in late November cause him to lose his head entirely and run away with the idea that winter is over. One must admit that it is the cock bird only that suffers from these wild enthusiasms, and while he is wasting his time on non-productive propaganda in the trees overhead, his wife is as usual trying to cope with the food situation on the lawn below. It has often occurred to me that it would be most interesting to hear the female bird's opinion of her mate's verbosity on these occasions. Judging from the rather contemptuous and bored expression on her face when she hunts for worms on the lawn, while the cock bird is pouring out his soul overhead, she regards this male

exuberance in much the same light as does the female of our species when a husband is holding forth on some hare-brained, impracticable idea that has suddenly occurred to him, and which, if carried out, will completely upset all the housekeeping arrangements.

In my particular case I think it is entirely the thrush's fault that I invariably sow my early potatoes too soon, and led away by the high-pitched remark that he is constantly repeating, which sounds very much like the words 'Plenty of work—plenty of work', I take out a box of seed tubers, which are sprouting vigorously in the greenhouse, to dibble them in the bed which has been prepared for them. As the result of this very early sowing the lusty Jaoulms of the potatoes are lifting up the cloches from the ground and entwining themselves in the wire attachments by the beginning of May, when once again led astray by the thrush's optimism about the future I decide to take a chance and, to enable the potatoes to make proper growth free from glass obstructions, I remove the cloches. If the experts whose difficult task it is to supply the B.B.C. with the weather forecasts for the next twenty-four hours would care to get in touch with me I could send them a telegram on the day when I do this, and they could then with the utmost confidence predict on the nine o'clock news that 'severe ground frosts are expected to-night in the south of England'.

Whilst on the topic of frosts one is constantly reminded, when one studies bird life in the garden, of the extent to which some varieties suffer during protracted cold spells. So far as this small corner of the world is concerned the local thrushes were completely exterminated during the weeks of frosts in since there was not a single pair nesting anywhere in the garden during that year, and it was not until the late autumn that I received a severely reduced ration of two birds to replace the odd dozen that had died during the long frost.

The coal and marsh tits also disappeared during the freeze, and since they were regular members of the birds' breakfast-table club where meals were served to deserving cases at almost every hour of the day, they cannot have died of starvation, but from failing

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to find a snug corner during the bitter cold nights. From most parts of the British Isles there were reports that the long-tailed tits were killed off to the last bird, but this was not the case in the south where I live. The long-tailed tits that I see are more or less nomads and, though no pairs nest in the immediate vicinity of the garden, I notice flocks of them numbering thirty or more from time to time during the winter and autumn. These big parties have been in evidence on several occasions since that long cold spell, and therefore those who regret the temporary absence of this most attractive little bird may console themselves that the variety is not extinct, as they fear, and in course of time may re-establish itself throughout the country.

Another bird that suffered most severely in many counties of England was the great green woodpecker, but my own particular pair got through the ordeal without losing a feather, so to speak, and have been most hilarious about it ever since. It is unusual to walk down the garden and to the field beyond without putting up from the ground this very easily pleased bird who can find something to laugh at every day of his life, which is more than I can manage. During the winter months this pair of birds was very much in evidence on trees quite close to the house, so that one was able to note the very scarlet face and other details of their exotic colouring which usually one fails to detect when one sees them at work on the lawn, or when they fly with exaggerated swoops to the nearest big tree.

When all the work and planning of March is before me, I am reminded of a good resolution I have made regularly on December 31st for many years, but which I have never yet put into effect. This is to keep a diary in which one records the tasks of the day, the results of those that one carried out a month ago and the weather experienced, together with any brilliant ideas that may occur to one with regard to the future. Invariably I think I shall remember all these things when the time comes, which is an extraordinary belief to entertain seeing that it is so manifestly obvious these days that I cannot remember anything. One of the results of failing to keep a diary to jog the memory is that I completely forgot to plant out my

garlic bulbs one year so that, not only was the kitchen deprived of this all-powerful flavouring during those dreary ewe-meat months when every form of spice, savour and condiment was so essential, but I have lost the particular strain of this garden sideline which I had brought home with me from Arab lands. There are a number of people, of course, who detest the smell of garlic to such an extent that they will be delighted to hear that there are a hundred fewer bulbs of this too-potent vegetable in the British Isles, but there are others who have learnt that, used discreetly, it provides an elusive and attractive flavouring to a dish that would otherwise be tasteless.

Another mistake I made last year was to put a most important sitting of eggs under a Light Holland Blue hen, although I had made a resolution in the past never again to trust one of this recently-produced strain with the task of hatching and bringing up a clutch of chicks. The present-day hen, as we all know, has probably less brain than any other living creature, and it has been my experience that the Holland Blue tops the list for sheer imbecility and ignorance of her job in life. If she does not smash every egg in the clutch through sitting down too hard on them, she usually asphyxiates and flattens out every chick as it emerges from the shell. If, by any chance, three or four manage to survive this treatment, they die of concussion of the brain shortly afterwards through figuring as boundary hits against the wire of the run every five minutes of the day as their idiotic mother cratches furiously in the turf when there is ample food for her family in the trough by her side.

A feature of March in England is that it frequently provides samples of a great variety of weather from wintry manifestations, such as driving sleet, to a real foretaste of the summer to come, when for two or three days the sun blazes in a cloudless sky and the air is warm and balmy. Every living thing in the garden shows its appreciation of this sudden welcome change to such an extent that one wonders why the Clerk of the Weather does not put it on more often, and for longer periods. The bird song in the garden and orchard is incessant from dawn until dusk, with blackbirds and thrushes carrying on what sound like tuneful arguments with

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their opposite numbers at the other end of the shrubbery; chaffinches and goldfinches holding forth with high-pitched notes from the topmost branches of their favourite trees; bullfinches singing their husky *sotto voce* ditty in the heart of the hedgerows; and the retiring little hedgesparrow affording proof that it is misnamed, and is justly entitled to the rank of warbler. The reptiles also respond to the warmth of the air, and in the midday heat the slow-worm, presumably with suicidal intent, indulges in a sun bath in a most conspicuous spot on one of the garden paths where sooner or later someone will mistake it for an adder; the big grass snake takes a swim in the gold-fish pond; and the various resident toads, looking extremely shabby after their long hibernation, come out in the evening to take stock of the slug situation.

Although on several occasions I have seen a couple of hares, and sometimes three or four, cutting the most ridiculous capers in the early days of spring, thus justifying the expression 'as mad as a March hare', it has never been my lot until this year to view a real old Bucks' Club demonstration such as others have described from time to time. It was taking place one morning in March in a large field a few miles south of Salisbury and to the north of Downton, which might be called Richard Jefferies's country, and which is possibly one of the best farmed districts in the land to-day. Since the field selected for the gathering had been recently harrowed in preparation for the sowing of oats or barley, it provided an excellent smooth surface, or dance floor, for the party which was in full swing when I passed in the car. Although I did give a signal that I was going to pull up, the driver of the car behind, who was not interested in hares, did not think I gave the signal soon enough, judging from the nasty look he gave me as he passed, and in any case he could not see the slightest reason why I had pulled-up.

I should imagine that the invitations to attend the party were issued the day before, since there were upwards of fourteen hares squatting in a circle, and fourteen buck hares represents considerably more than the male population of any one twenty-acre field in this fairly well-stocked area. So far as I could see, there was a Master

of Ceremonies, who was conducting the show generally, and who looked rather larger than the remainder of the gathering. He was presumably giving the order for the individual hares to come out and do a solo turn in the centre of the ring, and apparently also led the assembly when it was time to do the grand chain which we used to perform in the far-off days of the Lancers. The grand chain was the most amusing part of the show, for, when a solo turn had finished performing somersaults and exaggerated jumps in the centre of the ring, the whole party would turn smartly to the right or left and dance round the circle with high kicks and capers. While the solo turn was taking place, the hares assembled in the ring were mostly standing on their hind legs and appeared to be waving their front paws in the air, giving the impression that they were either beating time or acting as an enthusiastically clapping audience.

After some five minutes of the show, the old buck in charge presumably gave the order 'Dismiss', and every hare in the party immediately galloped away to the far corners of the field. Apparently, as sometimes happens with a battalion of infantry, the dismiss movement was not carried out with the smartness that the right type of adjutant demands at the conclusion of a parade, and the whole party was ordered to fall in again for further drill. When the second command to dismiss came a little later the hares lolloped away more slowly, and in a few minutes the field was completely empty, except for a couple of magpies who had been viewing the scene with marked disapproval.

I have been noticing lately the great numbers of nests that are made by various species of birds on the creeper-covered walls of the house, and in the several sheds and outbuildings which are necessary adjuncts to the ordinary country dwelling and its garden. Looking back into the past, when as a boy with the average boy's eye for a nest, I probably knew the location of nine-tenths of those built in the neighbourhood of the house in which I lived, I would say that there are far more birds to-day which take up their nesting quarters in the immediate vicinity of a human dwelling than there were, say, half a century ago. I am wondering if the explanation of this is that

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our birds are beginning to realise that the human beings of to-day are far more interested in the well-being of all forms of feathered life than were those of fifty years ago, and are taking advantage of the fact. We humans know the advantage of living conveniently close to a good shopping centre, and I suppose a nest constructed a few yards from a well-stocked birds' breakfast table saves a lot of unnecessary flying to and fro.

On the other hand it may be because the very considerable increase in numbers of the egg- and nestling-eating jays and magpies during the last ten years has caused the smaller birds to select for their nurseries spots in which these raiders are unlikely to venture. It must be remembered that some fifty years ago, when the average householder did not concern himself much about the welfare of any bird of the garden (except possibly the robin which from time immemorial has insisted on being recognised as a member of the family), the jay and magpie were bracketed top of the gamekeeper's list of vermin and were shot on sight. Despite this these picturesque undesirables managed to exist in many of the neighbouring woods, but they were not sufficiently numerous to emigrate and become regular visitors to the garden, nor did one see constant evidence of their evil work in almost every nest that our songsters make in the neighbourhood of the house, as happens to-day. It is so frequently the case when one has located in the orchard hedgerow the nest of some esteemed songster, such as the willow wren, goldfinch or blackcap, that sooner or later one finds it empty of eggs with the broken shells lying in the vicinity, or, if it escapes the jay's attention in the early days, the nestlings disappear shortly after they are hatched when the magpie discovers them.

Whenever one reads in the correspondence columns of a newspaper a complaint against these two rapacious birds, which have become far too plentiful of late, and a suggestion that steps should be taken to reduce their numbers, some confirmed bird-lover always writes to the effect that both the jay and the magpie have their good points, and that in any case it would be a pity to exterminate such handsome birds. I imagine that these letters are written by corres-

pondents who do not live in the country and see every day in spring evidence of the casualties they cause among the more desirable of our songsters, that we endeavour to encourage to take up their quarters in our gardens. In any case, whatever action is taken against these two birds, their advocates may feel quite certain that there is not the slightest risk of their becoming extinct since they are well able to look after themselves. In the days when there were far more gamekeepers than there are to-day, all of them supplied with unlimited cartridges for vermin destruction, and almost every school-boy endeavoured to obtain a young jay or magpie because they are easy to rear and make attractive pets, there was never any shortage of these birds. One did not see them constantly in the garden, but if one walked through any woodland one would sooner or later hear a harsh screech as a pair of jays fluttered out of the oak overhead, and in the course of one's wanderings one would usually flush a gathering of magpies, which, with the instinctive sense of danger of these birds, would vanish so quickly that one would be uncertain if one had seen a small manifestation predicting either sorrow or mirth, or one on a larger scale foretelling marriage or a birth. The correct word for a gathering of magpies is 'tiding', and I have heard so many versions of the jingle about the numbers of the bird, and their significance, that I am never very certain of what fate has in store for me when I see more than four. Incidentally, of recent years one often sees 'tidings' of thirty or forty magpies, and our forebears who composed these verses never visaged visitations of these dimensions since there is nothing on record to show what these numbers predict.

Among the many birds that nested in the vicinity of the house this year was the spotted flycatcher, who finds his way back to my garden every spring after the migration, and who always builds in the creeper near my study window, because from here he can take up his stance on the telephone wires overhead from which he is able to swoop down on the flies as they flutter past below. Then there was a coal-tit that built its nest very appropriately in the coal shed, a blue-tit that made hers in an empty five-gallon petrol tin in the

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garage, and the many wrens on the place, which took up their quarters in various sheds, seemed to choose the most inconvenient sites from my point of view. One of these was up the sleeve of a very well dressed scarecrow, which when the peas are in pod is placed in proximity to the rows to scare away jays and tits, and two were in bundles of string-netting which were hanging from the rafters of the tool shed waiting to play their part when the strawberries and raspberries were ripe.

As the result of this the scarecrow had to postpone his visit to the open air until the nestlings had flown from his sleeve, but the two nests in the string-netting were disregarded since they were not built for the raising of a family, but were those bachelor quarters with no interior lining which the cock wren builds for himself when he wishes to get right away from feminine interference. Those who study birds closely tell me that the cock wren is the most unsatisfactory and selfish husband, and does not do a hand's turn to assist his wife once the eggs are laid. It seemed to me that a fellow who spends all his time building snug quarters for himself, and whistling to passing females when he should be trying to find food for his sitting wife, deserved to have his hide-out destroyed when the string-netting was required for the fruit rows. In addition to all this building activity pairs of robins nested in every shed on the place as usual, and, owing to some mistake made by the robin officials who allotted the building sites in the spring, there were two pairs with families in a small lean-to that houses the garden roller and wheelbarrow, which led to a constant state of bickering.

One is always obtaining evidence of the robin's sublime faith in the beneficence of the human being, and recent happenings all over the world to disprove this belief would seem to have had no effect on the small bird's confidence in its opinion of us. In this connection I heard of a case of a pair of robins that nested at the top of a bookshelf in the children's playroom, a not particularly peaceful spot seeing that ping-pong was played there every day, and a dog was in general charge of things. The drawback to this site was that the windows of the room were closed every night, and at egg-laying

time, before the hen had moved into the room permanently, she was on two occasions in the early morning caught napping, or whatever the correct term is for a state of affairs when an egg has to be laid at an inconvenient time. Finding herself excluded from the room in which her nest was she fluttered and pecked at one of the bedroom windows upstairs until she woke the occupant, who, realising what her trouble was, went down to open up the playroom for her. The second time that this occurred the small bird's urgency was such that she was unable to reach her nest in time, and as the result laid her egg on the ping-pong table from which it was rescued, before it rolled to the floor, to be placed in the nest; and after this for the sake of peace and quietness in the early hours of the morning the playroom window was left open.

The extent to which the robin expects, in fact demands, to be helped by the human being in every way during the nesting season is such that I should not be unduly surprised to hear of a hen bird who laid her eggs on an incubator, suggesting to the poultry farmer that he should save her a lot of trouble by hatching them out for her!

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